will to follow through

by owlpostagain

Summary

“It depends entirely on how you look at it, I guess,” Stiles shrugs. “On the one hand, instant healing and the apparently inherited ability to pull off leather at all times. On the other, serious attitude problems and a suspicious disappearance of eyebrows.”

“Even Derek’s?” Danny snorts, “that’s a lot of eyebrow to lose.”

“I know,” Stiles agrees. “You should see, it’s so weird. Every time I want to ask him where they go, except he’d totally eat my face off.”

“There are worse ways to die.”

Notes

my beloved beta Allison texted me one day about how the song "(Fork and Knife)" by Brand New gives her both Stydia and Sterek feels, and how there aren’t really a lot of stories that deal with the transition of Stiles’ emotions from in love with Lydia and hating Derek to friends with Lydia and having feelings for Derek. Allison kind of has this power where she
talks and ten minutes later I open a new word document, so...

Beta'd by closestofcalls, the world's most perfect person and the beta to my alpha and all that jazz. title and lyrics come from the song "(Fork and Knife)" by Brand New.

also, this story has been split into two parts, because 42,400 words are a LOT, but if you're feeling ambitious and have a few free hours ahead of you I encourage you to hit the "entire work" button and read it like the one-shot it was written as.
Part I

you can’t hold on to the thrill
so I hope you find your will to follow through
(what we invented I am now ending)

Watching Lydia sink to the filthy concrete floor, cradling Jackson like the dirt and the blood and the slick sweat don’t mean anything, like there’s nothing that can stop her from sharing those last few breaths with him – it does something to Stiles. Does something to his ribs, maybe, makes them brittle and sharp, curling in a little tighter and pinching his lungs, his heart.

Later he’ll feel a little selfish about it; Lydia and Jackson are playing out their Satine and Christian horror story and Gerard’s mostly-dead, completely-disgusting body is gone, Peter’s apparently risen from the dead and Derek’s got this look on his face like he’s finally realizing he lost whatever tentative control he had. All Stiles cares about is that whatever fleeting chance he might have thought he had with Lydia has quite literally been given the kiss of death. The stubborn streak that dominates the majority of his personality wants to refuse, but Jackson’s not so dead after all, and he's looking at Lydia like she hung the moon and personally arranged the stars around it, and Stiles thinks this might be what the captain of the Titanic felt like when his unsinkable ship was well and truly sunk.

His departure is exponentially less dramatic than his arrival. There are shifty-eyed looks from Isaac and Scott is pointedly avoiding Derek's clearly betrayed expression. Allison's trigger-happy fingers are laced through Scott's, and Peter’s got a whole, fully functioning body again, and it all clearly screams that Stiles has missed a ton, has missed at least three major plot twists before crashing through the wall, and he could not give less of a fuck. He shuffles his way through the motley crew of bodies, stalks passed Chris Argent (and seriously, what), slams the door on his relatively unscathed Jeep and drives away. If anyone tries to stop him - well, Stiles doesn't have werewolf superhearing, and he makes a point of driving with his stereo cranked to top volume.

His bed is the best thing he's ever experienced in his entire life, and a delivery of hot-from-the-microwave Campbell's Chunky Chicken Noodle before his dad heads to work Saturday afternoon is enough to ensure Stiles doesn't have to leave the warm, safe confines of his well-worn comforter for at least another few hours. The low battery warning on his phone stopped beeping hours ago, the dull throbbing radiating from his temple and the iron-metallic taste from the split lip he keeps accidentally biting open is more than enough for him to claim illness, more than enough for him to pull the covers back over his head and ignore the bright, sunlit Saturday afternoon and the eight missed calls from Scott.

Sunday follows a similar pattern, and he doesn't go to school on Monday either, though he does begrudgingly get out of bed for more than just a trip to the bathroom. The bruise on his cheek has
settled into an ugly, mottled purple thing, the blood seeping further down toward his jaw and sinking into the fleshy apple of his cheek. Stiles finds it hard enough to suffer his dad’s empathetic wince every time he sees it; he has no interest in the half a dozen lies he’ll have to spread to explain it away at school. Besides, any post-victory fame he might’ve been granted would undoubtedly be overshadowed by Jackson’s death, or maybe his resurrection, and really that’s just another set of lies Stiles will have to spin, and he’s so tired of lying.

By Monday night, though, his father’s getting that pursed look around his mouth, the one that says they either need to move on or talk about it, and Stiles emphatically Does Not Want to talk about it. So when Tuesday morning rolls around he dutifully gets back in his Jeep and drives himself to school.

Because the universe is actually shit the very first person Stiles sees on campus is Isaac, leather clad and surprisingly short two-thirds of his usual entourage. He gives Stiles a long, uncomfortably appraising look, nods definitively, and promptly walks away without a word.


And, because things stopped making sense in his life even before he stopped giving a shit, the first person to drop down into the empty seat next to him in AP World, blink a lingering look at his bruised cheekbone, and open his mouth, is Danny Mahealani.

“So before Jackson left he said I should come find you. That you’d tell me what’s going on.”

“Um,” Stiles says back. Danny’s already giving him an exasperated, what did I do to deserve you look, like he doesn’t fully appreciate the brevity of what he’s just said to Stiles. This, of course, is probably because he doesn’t.

“Jackson…left?” Stiles starts with the easiest option. Maybe some people didn’t spend the last four days of their lives hiding in a bubble of fuck off under their makeshift blanket fortress of solitude.

“You really did check out for the last few days, didn’t you,” Danny frowns back at him. “Jackson’s like, gone gone. Something about being mistakenly pronounced dead by the paramedics and the Whittemores avoiding a scandal – the entire family’s shipped themselves off to ‘visit relatives’ on the East Coast.” He makes air quotes and everything, like it isn’t obvious enough that Danny doesn’t believe the half of it.

“What, you mean they can’t just pay it all to go away?” Stiles grumbles back.

The longsuffering look Danny gives him explains just some of how the kid’s managed to put up with Jackson and his own personal brand of douchebaggery for all these years.

“Fine,” Stiles relents. “So Jackson’s skipped town. And he told you what now?”

“That you’d explain everything,” Danny repeats. “And he put a stupidly heavy emphasis on everything, like he thought maybe I didn’t notice the monumental amounts of bullshitting going on around here lately.”

“Right, okay,” Stiles nods absentmindedly, fidgeting with the unraveling spiral binding on his notebook. “And Jackson nominated me for the job because…”

Danny shrugs. “He said of all the freaks at the circus you’re the least freaky. Also if you tell me everything, full disclosure, he’ll get Mr. Whittemore to tell the Sheriff that the kidnapping thing was a
retaliation in a prank battle he started, and he'll get his dad to repeal the restraining order.”

Stiles exhales a long, slow breath of air he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. That would be…well, it wouldn’t exactly repair his completely crumbling relationship with his dad, and it wouldn’t do much in terms of the Sheriff’s job, since he already got that back on his own, but it was something. A big something. And whether it was an olive branch from Jackson or a bargaining chip, or maybe both, it was enough for Stiles to nod a little more decisively this time.

“Fine,” he agrees. Danny looks expectant, like he’s waiting for Stiles to start talking right this very second, and Stiles rolls his eyes. “Not here,” he hisses. “Jesus Christ, you want me to explain at least ten different dead bodies, plus the inexplicable resurrection of two more, and you think I’m going to do it in the middle of our World History classroom?”

There’s a great battle of warring expressions on Danny’s face, like he’s not quite sure if he’s intrigued, disbelieving, or already seriously second guessing his decision to come anywhere within twenty feet of Stiles. He settles on something that looks vaguely interested enough while still maintaining a healthy level of suspicion.

Stiles doesn’t care. Danny can believe him or not, doesn’t make a damn bit of difference to him one way or another.


Danny makes a face like it’s the last place he’d like to be, but Stiles isn’t having this conversation in public. He’s still reeling from the feel of rough hands yanking him into the dark, of Scott conspiring with Gerard Argent, of Peter fucking Hale standing at Derek’s back like he’d never been a smoldering corpse buried under a pile of rotting wood. They’re having this conversation on Stiles’ terms or not at all.

He tugs his hood up over his head, because it’s hard to signal the definitive end of a conversation when you’re sitting at adjacent desks and class is about to start, and the movement triggers something in Danny. His eyes slide back over to the barely-concealed bruise spreading down the left half of Stiles’ face, and his disgruntled expression shifts to something softer, something more conciliatory.

“Okay, sure,” he agrees. “After school.”

He makes a point of not looking for her, which is why it takes Stiles until last period to figure out that Jackson isn’t the only conspicuous absence today. Lydia, as far as Stiles can remember, has never missed a math class for anything less than being bedridden at the hospital or PTSD from a fugue state, so he doesn’t blame himself for jumping to the worst possible conclusions. It’s only after he’s calmed down from the initial panic of werewolf Jackson Peter Hale Gerard Argent’s missing body does he consider the much, much worse possibility that Jackson, fresh-made werewolf who clearly anchored himself the same way Scott did with Allison, might have taken Lydia with him.

He dismisses that one almost as quickly. Lydia might love Jackson, but he thinks maybe she might love her perfect GPA more – Lydia may wind up absconding to the East Coast too, but it won’t be for another two weeks, not until after school’s out for the summer. Which means she’s here, fresh off what was undoubtedly a traumatic weekend, without Jackson.

Interesting.
He’s still considering it, distracted as he heads out towards his car after class, when he promptly gets waylaid by Scott.

“Dude,” Scott pouts aggressively at him, brows furrowed as he narrows his eyes at Stiles’ face. “Where the hell have you been?”

Stiles shrugs. Hiding. Ignoring Scott’s progressively more incessant texts and phone calls and, eventually, Stiles’ cell phone charger. Avoiding everything that existed outside of his bedroom. Pointedly staying away from anyone who was going to look at Stiles’ face the exact way Scott is right now.

“Seriously, I have like a million things to tell you, there’s like massive amounts of clean up to do, and we still haven’t found Gerard’s body –”

“Anytime now, Stilinski, it’s not like I had anything else to do today.”

Scott looks baffled at the sudden appearance of Danny at Stiles’ side, but Stiles does his best to play it off like he was totally in on this plan.

“Yeah yeah, keep your pants on,” Stiles rolls his eyes. He turns to interrupt Scott before whatever’s building up in Scott’s half-open mouth makes its way out. “You working tonight?”

“Until 8:00,” Scott nods, clearly about to protest. “But –”

“Cool, come over after,” Stiles cuts him off. “I’ll even feed you, if you promise not to smell like wet dog when you get there.”

The promise of food, combined with the confusion of watching Stiles walk away with Danny, of all people, seems to be enough to temporarily placate Scott. At least he doesn’t follow them, which is good enough for Stiles.

He waits until Danny’s actually climbing into the passenger seat of his Jeep to raise an eyebrow at the other teen.

“I don’t have a car,” he reminds Stiles. “And my ride’s left town. Besides, you looked like you needed the save.”

There’s really not much to argue there, so Stiles doesn’t bother. They drive in silence, and if Danny finds it strange that the most notorious loud-mouth rambler of their class doesn’t have so much as a single word of small talk to make, he doesn’t say anything.

He’s surprisingly patient, actually, quietly following Stiles into the kitchen and leaning against the counter while Stiles digs through the fridge. Stiles considers the possibility that Danny might not have expected him to agree so easily, that Stiles might not have been so willing to let him in on the secrets they’ve obviously been keeping from him. Danny’s not stupid, there’s no doubt in Stiles’ mind that Danny’s known there’s a lot Jackson wasn’t telling him for a while now.

If Scott hadn’t told him – if Derek had gotten there first, before Stiles got involved, would Stiles know? Or would he be in the same seat as Danny, helplessly watching his best friend fall further and further into something dark and dangerous, something they couldn’t do a damn thing about. Would it have been better, that way? If he didn’t know?
“I’m only going to warn you once,” he says quietly to Danny, dropping two plates of sandwiches on the kitchen table and gesturing Danny towards an empty chair. “This is one of those things that once you know, you know, and there’s no going back. You can’t unknow, or unsee, and it’s not exactly a picnic in the park.”

“Are you offering me the blue pill?” Danny asks, the corner of his mouth lifting in a halfhearted smirk.

“On a better day I’d fall a little bit in love with you for that,” Stiles tells him solemnly. He’s only half kidding. “But yeah. Exactly. Blue pill’s gonna mean a lifetime of knowing your best friend’s lying to you – to protect you, to keep you safe, but still lying. Red pill means you’re gonna spend the rest of your life lying to your family, your other friends, and yourself. A lot of lying.”

“But I’ll know the truth,” Danny counters. “About everything.”

“About why Jackson left, and why Lydia’s a wreck,” Stiles nods. “How Scott and Isaac Lahey turned into overnight lacrosse stars, and why the Argent family’s been decimated by more than half in less than a month.”

Danny processes for a minute, focusing most of his attention on the untouched sandwich in front of him. Stiles lets him think, fusses with his own sandwich, rearranging the two slices of bread until the corners are perfectly aligned.

“Does it also have anything to do with why your cousin Miguel bears a striking resemblance to Derek Hale, who you may or may not have been harboring illegally from your own dad?”

Stiles doesn’t bother holding back the laugh – it’s as devoid of actual humor as any laugh could possibly be, bitter and sharp and oh, does it ever have to do with Derek fucking Hale.

“Last chance,” he warns, leveling his gaze on Danny.

Danny looks back unflinchingly, holding Stiles’ stare before nodding firmly. “Red pill.”

Stiles sighs. “Danny,” he says slowly, “what do you know about werewolves?”

Danny takes it surprisingly well, considering a. Stiles has absolutely no physical evidence to back it up and, b. apart from sounding like a mash up of a bad teen romance novel and a eighties teen comedy, the story also includes Danny’s best friend brutally attacking and murdering an alarming number of people, including Danny himself.

There’s a lot of silence again as Stiles drives Danny home, but that’s probably reasonable. It’s a lot to take in. Besides, Stiles just talked more in an hour than he had in the last four days – he’s content with the break, with the silence.

“Listen,” there is one last thing, though, just to be sure. “It kind of goes without saying…”

“I won’t tell anyone,” Danny shakes his head vehemently. “Even if they actually believed me, I’m not stupid. Don’t worry.”
“I trust you,” Stiles shrugs. It’s a lie; he doesn’t at all. It’s nothing to do with Danny, really – Stiles has had a very rough and fast lesson in trust recently, and maybe Danny’s done nothing to lose Stiles’ trust, but he’s done nothing to earn it either.

Danny doesn’t call him on it, just issues a low goodnight as he slams the Jeep’s door shut behind him. Stiles waits until Danny’s let himself in the front door, a lesson he’d learned from his mother, and Scott’s frequent inability to remember his house key (there’s more than one reason Stiles has his own key).

And much like when you speak of the Devil, Scott’s sitting on Stiles’ front stoop when he pulls the Jeep into the driveway, chin in his hands and elbows on his knees like Scott couldn’t get into the house effortlessly on his own. It sparks a little something low and deep in the pit of Stiles’ stomach, something like hesitation or wary; it’s been years since Scott’s felt uncomfortable at the Stilinski’s.

“Deaton let me off early,” Scott offers, pushing himself upright as Stiles walks slowly up to the stoop.

“You could’ve let yourself in,” Stiles reminds him, stepping around Scott and nodding at the front door. “Or did you lose your keys again?”

“Nope. I just didn’t want to scare you.” There’s a sheepish expression on Scott’s face when Stiles turns a narrow-eyed gaze his way. “I – uh – might’ve talked to your dad. He said you’ve been a little jumpy since Friday, and I didn’t want you to freak out when you thought you were coming home to an empty house and found a werewolf there instead.”

The warning in Stiles’ gut fades almost completely, replaced by a low burn of guilt that he’d been suspicious of Scott. That was surprisingly considerate of his best friend, especially considering the way Stiles completely and undeniably would have gone batshit crazy if he thought he was facing another threat so soon.

“When’d you see Dad?” He focused his attention on unlocking the door, counting on Scott to accept the shift in subject without question.

“I ran into him on Sunday when he was on patrol,” Scott explains, shuffling in behind Stiles and locking the front door again behind him. “He asked me about what happened to you after the game, but I told him I didn’t know, that I hadn’t seen you.”

“It wasn’t completely a lie,” Stiles offers, because he knows Scott feels just as guilty about lying to their parents as he does. He hasn’t had much time yet to explore the bitter feeling of knowing that Ms. McCall was in on the secret now, that Scott didn’t have to hide things from her anymore.

“No, it wasn’t.” Scott shoulders Stiles further down the hall until they’re firmly in the brightly lit kitchen, snagging Stiles’ jaw between two carefully human fingers and tilting his injured cheek closer for Scott’s inspection.

Stiles lets him survey the damage without complaint. It was something of a werewolf thing, he’d realized. Scott, and even Derek to a degree, had an uncomfortable habit of not trusting his own assessment of his injuries, of needing to observe them for themselves. Maybe not just a werewolf thing – maybe a pack thing, because Stiles was nothing if not Scott’s pack.

“So what did happen?” Scott finally asks, releasing his light grip on Stiles’ chin with a satisfied but deeply unhappy look on his face.
“Gerard,” Stiles offers, turning away before he can see Scott’s reaction. “Apparently old age made him forget how to use pen and paper, maybe a phone, because he thought this was the best way to send a message to the pack. Well. That and stringing Erica and Boyd up with electrified wire.”

“Chris let them go. As far as I know they haven’t come back though – Isaac said they were leaving.”

There’s a long conversation ahead of them, and Stiles wants nothing more than to crawl back into his bed, recharge under the safety of his comforter and pretend that werewolves were still just an annoying-but-slightly-less-popular-than-vampires side effect of the Twilight phenomenon and maybe some really, really bad CGI in everything from Underworld to Harry Potter. He knows from experience with that particular expression on Scott’s face, though, that that’s not happening for at least another few hours, and regardless of how much Stiles is Not in the Mood, they’re going to talk now.

So they compare notes. Scott tells him about the plan he and Deaton had concocted against Gerard and how he formally declared his intent to stay separate from Derek’s pack. Stiles tells him about the Argent’s basement, Jackson’s sudden relocation, and Danny’s newfound knowledge.

They don’t talk about Allison, or Lydia. They don’t talk about Isaac, who Stiles couldn’t help but notice spent most of the school day at Scott’s right shoulder, a position Stiles knew was werewolf code for Second in Command. They don’t talk about Derek, or Peter, who neither of them have seen or heard from since they left the warehouse Friday night.

Those, Stiles suspects, are all completely separate, heavily weighted conversations that he just can’t handle right now. Scott, years and years of practice under his belt, doesn’t need to be told twice. He cleans up the plate of leftovers Stiles had dutifully provided him with, takes one last lingering look at the wrecked surface of Stiles’ face, and lets himself out the back door.

For significant lack of better option, and because really, what control does he actually have, Stiles lets the week progress much the same way as Tuesday. School is a study in avoiding other people, which Stiles never would have assumed to be as difficult as is, considering six months ago he had exactly one friend. Erica and Boyd are still missing, Jackson’s gone and Lydia hasn’t been at school yet this week, but Isaac is everywhere, and so is Scott. Danny pops up when Stiles least expects him to, like he’s not quite sure where they stand but wants to maintain open lines of communication with Stiles for when he eventually makes up his mind. Even Allison seems to be steadily hovering in his peripheral vision, always silent and withdrawn, deadly pale and looking for all the world like she’d rather be anywhere than here. That, at least, Stiles can relate to.

Scott and Allison are broken up for real these days. It takes Stiles less than half of Wednesday to figure that one out, and while he feels for the quiet heartbreak he knows his best friend is suffering, he can’t bring himself to feel all that bad about it. Not entirely for nothing, and maybe not without some provocation, but Stiles did manage to glean enough information from Gerard to learn that Allison had been the one to unflinchingly shoot down and capture Boyd and Erica, and that she was fully aware of what was happening to them, to at least, if not Stiles, in the basement of her own house.

Still, they don’t talk about it until Friday, until Stiles is back in his room, hood of his oversized lacrosse sweatshirt up over his head and attention firmly devoted to blowing the shit out of things in his latest RPG effort. He ignores the first call because he doesn’t notice it, the second because he doesn’t care, but the third attempt, a text this time, is enough for Stiles to pause and reach over for his phone.
allisons leaving 4 smmer not cming bck til spt!!! :( 

He’s a good enough friend (read: feels guilty enough for being a dick all week) that he finally calls Scott back, lets him ramble about their break-up, his declaration that he’d wait for her, her finding him after school to tell him she and her dad were taking a “trip.”

It’s not until much later, phone off and charging on his nightstand, laying in bed staring at the eerie outline of the snowboarder decal on the wall (that was going to have to go. Immediately.), when it occurs to him.

Jackson was gone. Allison was gone. Lydia was suffering the aftermath of one hell of a few weeks without her best friend or her boyfriend there for her.

And just like that, Stiles’ planning instinct kicks it, without him even meaning to. Because obviously, obviously, standing around doing nothing for the last God knows how many years has done absolutely nothing for him in terms of getting Lydia’s attention. The only times he’s gotten anywhere close to it lately have been when he’s stopped acting like a flailing boy with a crush and acted like they were friends. Or maybe not friends yet, but had the potential to be.

Because if there’s one thing Stiles is good at, it’s being a hell of a good friend. Scott could vouch for him – Scott should take lessons from him. Stiles is totally the kind of guy you want in your corner if you were having a shit time of it; he knows those feelings all too well, has spent way too much of his time perfecting how to deal with them. He could be there for Lydia. In fact, he’s the best person to be there for Lydia, because how many other completely human people in this town were in the know enough to be able to have unguardedly frank conversations about exactly what’s been going on. He’s perfect for that job, it was practically written for him. And if she got to know him, if Lydia really got to know Stiles…

Well. It couldn’t hurt.

He wakes up and texts Scott. Texts Scott incessantly, a steady stream of get up get up get up at minute intervals until Scott finally responds to the fourteenth, WTF IM UP!!????????!!!!!!! in all capitals. Stiles gives him some time to stew in it, leaving the message unanswered as he helps himself to a leisurely shower.

were stdying 4 chem final he tells Scott twenty minutes later, shoving his feet into sneakers and grabbing his backpack off his desk chair. ur gonna pass if it kills me

Scott texts him back a single k, most likely because he knows it drives Stiles absolutely batshit to waste a text on a single letter, but Stiles will take what he can get. He scribbles a quick note for his dad, just in case, and slams his way out the front door and into his Jeep.

It’s a quick stop at the coffee shop halfway between his and Lydia’s house, and he doesn’t bother feeling ashamed about the fact that he knows her favorite order, and he’s standing on her front porch, precariously gripping two cups in one hand as he knocks on the door with his free fist.

He’s surprised when Lydia herself answers, even more surprised when she’s standing there in oversized lacrosse sweatpants that could only be Jackson’s and a worn camp t-shirt with a slit cut into the collar. She doesn’t look that surprised to see him, and definitely doesn’t look like she remotely cares about her current state of dress, just stands back and gestures him inside with a
“No, it’s cool, I’m just stopping by,” Stiles tells her, and that elicits more surprise than his initial appearance did. Lydia levels him with an impatient look, and he holds up the coffees in defense.

“I come bearing ambrosia,” he offers, switching his cup into his right hand and handing Lydia the untouched one meant for her. “And also like serious amounts of apologies.”

“What for?” Lydia accepts the paper to go cup with a substantially more serene expression, humming in approval after her first sip. She looks up expectantly when he doesn’t respond, watching him shrug with sharp brown eyes.

“I didn’t mean to yell at you like that,” Stiles admits, wincing slightly as he remembers the way he flipped on her. She’s already shaking her head, opening her mouth to respond, but he pushes on before she can speak. “No, seriously. It’s not cool to snap like that, especially given everything that was going on, and I feel really bad about it. I’m sorry.”

“It happens,” Lydia says dismissively, a weak smile flashing briefly from behind the rim of her coffee cup. “Like you said, there was a lot going on, and you’d just…” she releases the grip she still had on the doorknob to gesture loosely at Stiles’ still-bruised cheek. “Well. I’d’ve been a little on edge too.”

“Fair,” he nods conciliatorily. “Anyway, I also wanted to say that I heard about Jackson leaving. And now Allison too, after finals, and if last time didn’t make you totally adverse to ever talking to me ever again, I’m still here. If you have any questions about anything that’s been going on, or if you just want someone around who you don’t have to lie to.” Stiles grins a slightly self-deprecating grin, and Lydia returns another tentative smile back.

He makes a point not to push it – he’s there to put the idea in her head and leave before he overstays his welcome.

“That…I might take you up on that,” Lydia tells him, and it literally takes everything he has for Stiles to stop himself from a victory dance right there on the Martin’s front porch. “You could come in, if you wanted. I was memorizing conjugations for my French final, but I could easily be persuaded into something else.”

Stiles has had countless dreams about this moment, Lydia bumping her front door further open with a little nudge of her hip and gesturing again for him to come in, but it is integral to his plan that he say no. Not playing hard to get, necessarily, but the drop-everything-and-jump-on-Lydia’s-command doormat look hasn’t been working for him thus far, so it’s time to try a new tactic.

“I’m actually on my way to Scott’s,” Stiles tells her instead, offering an apologetic half-smile. “I’m going to get him a passing grade on the chem final if it means literally teaching him morse code and tapping out the answers during the test.”

Lydia laughs, and Stiles bites back a grin because he totally made Lydia Martin laugh.

“Okay,” she concedes. “That’s clearly going to take all day, so I’ll let you get to that.”

There’s something a little sour in her expression though, a little sad and maybe a little lonely, and Stiles doesn’t care if it’s just because Lydia must be craving any kind of social interaction after a week of self-imposed exile, he’ll take the bait he’s been offered.
“I was planning on going to the library tomorrow though,” he says casually, “brushing up on all the books we’ve read in English this year, maybe outlining a few of the potential essays Mrs. Donovan gave us.”

“I was going to spark notes *A Separate Peace,*” Lydia admits, “I missed it when I was in the hospital.”

“I’m actually pretty sure I have an entire notebook of notes on that one,” Stiles tells her truthfully. They’d talked about it *extensively* in class, talking circles around the overwhelming homoerotic undertone without ever actually getting there, and Stiles had filled half a spiral notebook with his own speculation on Gene and Finny’s relationship. “If you can manage to decipher my completely shit handwriting, that is.”

“Sounds like a challenge.” From her tone, it’s clearly one that Lydia accepts. “The library opens at noon on Sundays. I’ll bring the coffee?”

“Black,” Stiles responds, tilting his mostly empty cup towards her. “Don’t let them put a single packet of sugar in it unless you don’t mind hours and hours of incessant pen clicking.”

“Noted,” Lydia nods. “See you tomorrow, Stiles. Thanks for the coffee.”

He waits until he’s at a red light half a mile away to let out a large congratulatory whoop for a job seriously well, well done.

It takes Scott all of twenty seconds to notice the spring in Stiles’ step, bounding up the McCall’s front walk and bouncing on his toes as he waits for his best friend to open the door. Scott looks like he’d gone straight back to bed the second Stiles stopped texting him, and Stiles shoves the bag of pastries he’d also gotten at the coffee shop into Scott’s already waiting hands.

“Are you high?” is his first question. Stiles rolls his eyes, closing the front door behind him and elbowing his way into the kitchen while Scott digs through the pastries and shuffles along behind him.

“My dad is still the Sheriff and would still smell pot on me in thirty seconds or less,” Stiles reminds Scott, “and so would you. Although I do wonder if you can get high. We should test that theory.”

“Let’s not,” Scott mumbles through a mouthful of blueberry muffin. “So why are you grinning like Lydia just…she didn’t.”

“She didn’t,” Stiles agrees, “but we are hanging out tomorrow.”

“Hanging out,” Scott repeats flatly, and Stiles can feel the stern look his best friend has leveled at the back of his head.

“My dad is still the Sheriff and would still smell pot on me in thirty seconds or less,” Stiles reminds Scott, “and so would you. Although I do wonder if you can get high. We should test that theory.”

“Keep your judginess away from me,” Stiles scowls, batting one hand uselessly in Scott’s direction. “Hanging out. We’re going to be friends. I have a feeling Lydia could use a few more of those right now.”

“And if, now that Jackson’s been shipped off to Cape Cod, she happens to realize you’re awesome and fall madly in love with you once she sees what a great friend you are…” Scott supplies. They’ve been friends for far too long.
“Entirely her own doing,” Stiles shrugs. “I heard it was Manhattan.”

“I hope it was Antarctica.” Scott throws himself into the chair next to Stiles, wiping his greasy fingers against his basketball shorts before reaching to tug his chemistry textbook across the table.

They make it a solid two hours before the subject of Allison comes up, and Stiles manages to steer Scott back to the topic on hand in a record-breaking ten minutes. The fifth time they revisit the subject of her leaving, four and a half hours after they started and ten minutes after Stiles started quizzing Scott on how to read the periodic table, Stiles clears his throat and fixes his gaze on a spot somewhere over Scott’s right shoulder.

“I think we should tell Derek.”

Scott’s eyes flash gold, a low growl rising unbidden from his throat. Stiles does his best to hold his ground.

“I mean it, I think he should know,” he insists. “Wouldn’t you want him to tell us if something important was happening?”

“Derek didn’t even tell us things when we were actually working with him,” Scott scoffs. “Why should we?”

“Because every time we try to keep secrets from each other we all wind up caught in a shitstorm of hell fire,” Stiles says patiently, far more patiently than he actually feels. The entire afternoon has been an exercise in patience, to be completely honest. “Also, people tend to die.”

“I don’t want to talk to him,” Scott insists, and it almost just borders on this side of a whine.

“Somehow I don’t think he’s really interested in talking to you either, these days,” Stiles shoots back. “Or do you not remember adamantly declaring yourself Not His Pack after shamelessly using him as a deadly weapon in the master plan you didn’t bother letting him in on?”

Scott has the grace to squirm slightly at that, but maintains his self-righteous look just like Stiles knew he would. Scott will go to his grave convinced he did the right thing with Gerard, and Stiles will go to his grave without ever pointing out to Scott how small it probably made everyone else, Stiles included, feel.

“Fine, you tell him then.” Scott sounds satisfied, like he’s won, like he’s certain Stiles would rather let the Argents leave and a thousand hunters take their place then voluntarily seek out and speak to Derek.

Stiles, though, now that he’s given himself the idea, is thinking more and more about what a good one it actually is. Scott’s made his intent clear – he’s his pack, omega at worst, pseudo-alpha to Stiles and occasionally Allison at best, and Derek and whoever’s left with him are on their own. Stiles hasn’t decided how he feels about that yet, whether or not he’s in support of the permanent split and of Scott being his supposed Alpha, but he’s growing increasingly more certain with each passing second that there needs to be some sort of truce between the werewolves in Beacon Hills.

And maybe, possibly, that’s where the token human comes in.

“Okay, good,” he nods, “I will.”
Scott opens his mouth to protest, and Stiles cuts him off with a question about how many electrons Potassium has.

They make it another hour before Scott’s eyes start glazing over, and even Stiles wants to cry at the thought of suffering through another chapter of notes, so they call it a day and spend a well-earned hour beating each other’s avatars senseless on Brawl. Ms. McCall comes home in time to invite Stiles for dinner, but Stiles bows out, shooting Scott a stern and significant look as he insists he has an errand to run before heading home.

He’s honestly not sure where to find Derek – now that Gerard isn’t a threat, would he have returned to the ruins of the Hale house? – but the train depot’s closer to Scott’s house, so he tries there first. He spots the Camaro a subtle two blocks away from the mostly-hidden back entrance, but the person waiting in the cleared out center of the warehouse isn’t Derek.

“No,” Stiles tells Peter flatly, crossing his arms over his chest and glaring at the newly-undead older man. “Nope. Absolutely not. Get out.”

“Hello Stiles,” Peter replies calmly, smirking like he hasn’t heard a word of Stiles’ protests. “Nice to see you, Stiles. You’re looking well. Murder agrees with you, I see.”

“Get out,” Stiles repeats, stubbornly ignoring him. “I need to talk to Derek, and I’m not doing it with you here.”

“Now, it’s awfully rude to show up uninvited at someone else’s…well, as reluctant as I am to call this place a *home* –”

“Out,” Derek orders, stalking out of the half-shredded rail car. Stiles opens his mouth to protest when Derek tacks a sharply growled ‘Peter,’ on the end.

Peter doesn’t protest, merely holds up his hands in surrender and leaves the way Stiles came in without a word. Derek watches him go with narrowed eyes, holding up a hand when Stiles tries to speak again.

“I can still hear your heartbeat,” he says, a conversational tone that Stiles is confident Peter can hear all the way outside. “Do something useful like picking up the pizzas Isaac just ordered.”

The Alpha waits another minute or two before turning back to face Stiles, shifting the weight of his discontent until it’s pinning Stiles in place. They blink slowly at each other, Derek poorly hiding his curiosity and annoyance while Stiles tests the limits of his welcome.

“So I heard Scott’s declared himself officially out,” Stiles starts, because there’s no better strategy than to piss the angry werewolf off from the very beginning of the already potentially volatile conversation.

Derek’s upper lip curls into something like a sneer and he doesn’t bother to grace Stiles with a verbal response. It’s not physical either, at least not in the form of shoving Stiles bodily into something, so he’ll take that much as a win and keep going.

“Anyway, I think if there’s one thing we’ve all learned it’s that keeping secrets from each other, at least when it comes to secrets about people who are trying to kill us, you, and/or the general population of Beacon Hills…well things don’t really end too well for all of us. Or, I guess
technically they do, but usually by some eleventh hour heroics that still leave behind a mostly unnecessary pile of dead bodies and bruised humans.”

Derek’s eyes drift to the bruise still marring Stiles’ left cheek, focused on ground zero, the pinprick of heavier marks where the blunt knuckle of Gerard’s middle finger had hit.

“You probably should have had this conversation with Scott,” Derek points out. “Maybe a few weeks ago. I don’t think it’s doing much for you now.”

“Fine,” Stiles nods. “That’s fair. Except, for the record, Scott didn’t tell me jack shit either. None of it. Not until after the fact. So you can act all betrayed and bitter and get revenge by not letting us know next time there are hunters in town until someone’s already been shot by one, and I will sit here and judge the hell out of you for being petty and childish. Or you could be an adult for ten seconds and hear me out.”

Derek looks about a hair’s breadth away from going Beta on him, which Stiles would really like to actively avoid because one, werewolves and two, he’ll get entirely too distracted by questions like where’d Derek’s considerable eyebrows go and why doesn’t he ever full on Alpha-out, and he doesn’t have time for that.

“Or you could stand there and growl,” Stiles amends, trying to sound braver than he actually feels. “I can wait, it’s cool.”

Derek reins it in just enough that his eyes are closer to their indiscernible rings of color than to the angry Alpha red, so Stiles takes a discrete breath and trucks on forward.

“I think we should agree to keep each other informed,” he says quickly, determined to get out as much of his plan as possible before Derek starts protesting. “As informed as possible, as often as possible. A regular exchange of information during peace times, constant updates when something’s going down.”

“No,” Derek declares bluntly. “No.”

“So you have trust issues,” Stiles scoffs. “Fine. In a delightful turn of events, you’re no longer the only one with that problem.”

Something in Derek’s expression twists at that, like he’s not surprised but still doesn’t like hearing Stiles admit it. He’d overanalyze that if he could muster up the will to give a shit, but Stiles is on a roll right now and way too interested in giving Derek a piece of his mind to worry about trivialities like Derek’s weird tics.

“You don’t want to trust me, that’s whatever. Apparently I’ve done nothing to earn it, so fine, do whatever makes you feel like you’re still the one in control here. But this isn’t about trust, this is about safety. The safety of your pack, and the safety of Scott’s.”

“Why should I care about the safety of Scott’s pack?” Derek sneers back, voice harsh and sharp even halfway across the room. “You’ve both made it clear you’re not my responsibility.”

He has one card left, and out of everything he’s played so far it’s the one he’s most reluctant to use. It’s skirting the edge of downright cruel, especially if one or two of Stiles’ more suspicious theories are accurate, but he’s chock full of conviction that this is a thing they need to do, and if nothing else will convince Derek, well…
“Think about how you’ll feel if something happens to Scott, or to me, because you deliberately withheld information. Can you bear the weight of another death on you conscience, Derek?”

Derek goes white. Stiles forces his sympathetic wince to stay internal – apart from just confirming that, at the very least, Derek feels responsible for more than his fair share of deaths, the look on his face is the closest to sheer horror Stiles has ever seen.

They’re quiet for a long moment. Stiles has said his piece, has said more than he wanted to, really, and it’s on Derek now. Derek gets to decide where to go from here, to take Stiles offer or leave it, and Stiles is struck with the sudden weight of the situation. This is it. If Derek says no, if Derek turns him down, he’s not sure that the two packs will ever fully repair their crumbling association enough to work together.

“I’m not working with Scott,” Derek says finally, quietly. “I’ll talk to you, that’s it.”

“I wouldn’t believe a word that came out of Peter’s mouth if it came with a notarized affidavit witnessed by you and my Dad,” Stiles responds. Negotiations. He can do negotiations.

“I don’t know where Isaac’s loyalties lie anymore. He stayed for Scott, not for me.”

“He’s, either subconsciously or intentionally, assumed the stance of Scott’s second, but at the end of the day he still talks about you like you’re his Alpha.”

“I still don’t trust you.”

It hurts more than it should. It’s not the first time Derek’s said it, and even before that Stiles had his suspicions, but it hurts all the same now as it did back in the pool. Back when Derek had outright said Stiles was only keeping him alive to save his own neck, like Stiles hadn’t stepped in to help Derek, groaning and grumbling but still unquestionably helping, half a dozen times already. It’s bitter acid on an empty stomach, the sharp throb of trying to swallow over a ragged sore throat, of breathing under broken ribs.

Stiles shoves it aside.

“Yeah,” he says. “You’ve made that abundantly clear.”

Derek looks at him like he’s waiting for Stiles’ confession of the same, but he’ll be waiting a long time for that, because Stiles doesn’t say anything. Derek is a walking lie detector, and Stiles would rather lie by omission than give Derek the satisfaction.

“The Argents are leaving town,” Stiles tells him instead, assuming the negotiation of terms has ended. “Next week. Thus far it’s just for the summer, but it wouldn’t surprise me if that became more permanent later. Also, Jackson told two people before he left. Lydia, who was already halfway in the know anyway, and Danny. He –”

“I remember Danny,” Derek mutters darkly. Stiles bites back a smirk. “Should I be worried about him?”

“Danny’s a good friend,” Stiles defends, like he himself hadn’t worried about Danny’s loyalty. “He swears he won’t tell anyone. I believe him.”
He doesn’t say trust, and from the way Derek’s eyebrows shift Stiles thinks maybe he might have picked up on that. If it’s enough to concern him, though, he doesn’t let on.

“Fine,” the werewolf nods. “If you have any reason to suspect otherwise, let me know.”

“You’ll be the first,” Stiles responds cheekily. Derek glares at him. “It’s your turn now.”

“Peter’s back,” Derek says first.

“I hadn’t noticed,” Stiles hisses scathingly. “Go on, tell me more, this is such news.”

“I have no idea what his angle is, but I don’t trust him any further than I can throw him.”

“Which, werewolf strength and all, is actually probably a fair distance, so maybe you should consider a better analogy,” Stiles comments, because honestly, this is the best Derek has for him?

“Fine,” Derek snarks back, “I don’t trust him any further than you can throw him.”

“Rude,” Stiles mutters, “but admittedly more accurate. Do you have anything actually relevant to tell me?”

“There’s another pack in town,” and yeah, okay. That’s relevant. “Specifically a pack of Alphas. They kind of – they consider themselves some kind of authority amongst werewolf packs, and the way the Alpha position has changed hands twice in three months, combined with the apparent reemergence of Hales back on Hale territory…we’ve drawn their attention.”

“A pack of Alphas,” Stiles repeats breathlessly. “A whole pack of them. A pack of werewolves who are each equally as powerful as Peter was when he was mid-rampage?”

“Probably more,” Derek admits. “We don’t know much about them yet. I’ve been looking through some of the files Peter salvaged from the house, but…”

“I’ll see what I can pull up,” Stiles nods back, already considering possible combinations of Google searches that might actually turn up relevant information. He’s halfway towards turning away before he remembers the last point he’d wanted to bring up, turning back around into the searching look Derek was right in the middle of laying on him.

“Did you guys find, or move, or bury, or burn, or do anything to Gerard’s body after we left the warehouse?” he asks, filing away Derek’s scrutiny to study at a time when it doesn’t make his stomach turn over.

The alpha shakes his head, frowning. “Haven’t seen him since,” he admits, and he can tell right away it’s not the answer Stiles wanted to hear.

“The police have declared him missing,” Stiles tells him. “They’re keeping it quiet, last thing they need right now, considering he was the high school principal and all, but they’ve formally declared him missing.”

“And missing means they haven’t found a body either,” Derek guesses.

Stiles lets himself out of the train depot, leaving Derek still standing in the center with the implications of that one sinking in.
Finals suck. Not because they’re difficult; Stiles blows through them with ease, taking particular pleasure in his confidence that he got at least an A on Harris’s chem exam, but because there is entirely too much down time in between them, and down time leads to thinking time.

On the bright side, studying with Lydia is awesome. They meet up again on Tuesday so Lydia can help Stiles cram his short term memory full of math formulas, and Thursday afternoon Danny joins them as they quiz each other with 5 Steps to a 5 flash cards left over from the AP World History exam in May.

That’s not to say it’s easy, because it’s not. It’s a study in patience and self-control, two things Stiles has never had much luck with, and every time Lydia’s lips quirk in a smile directed his way, every time he earns himself a quietly appraising look, a pleasantly surprised wow, I didn’t see that coming from you in the form of an arched eyebrow, he thinks his heart might actually beat its way right out of his ribcage. It’s a small blessing none of the werewolves are anywhere near them – even Scott wouldn’t be able to keep quiet about his smug amusement at Stiles’ racing pulse.

It doesn’t help that Lydia, despite her surprisingly friendly attitude shift towards Stiles, despite the small smiles she frequently bestows on him, is surrounded by a perpetual air of quiet misery. It sits heavy on her shoulders, in the shadows under her eyes and the undertone of her voice, and Stiles doesn’t know what to do about it. They haven’t really gotten anywhere close to a place where he can call her on it, not without her breaching the topic first, and Stiles doesn’t dare disrupt the tentative status quo they’ve fallen into. It’s camaraderie more than friendship, he gets that, but it’s a start, and it’s the furthest into his plan Stiles has ever managed to get, and he’s not going to jeopardize that just because Lydia misses Jackson.

Still, as much as they suck, he doesn’t really know what to do with himself now that finals are over. His main excuse to talk to Lydia is gone, Scott seems to have fallen off the face of the Earth (and straight into the waiting arms of one Isaac Lahey), and of course now, now that the school year is over and summer looms easy and empty in front of him, now there’s no sign of a supernatural crisis. The Alpha pack hasn’t been heard from since they left their calling card on the Hale’s front door, there hasn’t been so much as a whiff of Erica and Boyd, and while Gerard’s body hasn’t been found, there hasn’t been any suspicious activity to suggest he’s still alive and wreaking havoc elsewhere either.

Stiles would know, he’s been checking. Like he said, he’s been bored.

After the fifth failed attempt at coaxing Scott into hanging out with him five days in a row (“sorry man, Isaac and I are going to see how far we can run. I think he wants to see if he can track Erica and Boyd,” because how is Stiles supposed to argue with that?), Stiles finally caves and texts Lydia.

what do normal humans do w/o a supernatural crisis for fun?

they go to parties Lydia texts him back almost immediately, and Stiles doesn’t even try to pretend like that doesn’t send a little thrill down his spine. like the one at katie chung’s house tonight.

only cool kids get invites to summer parties he reminds her, because Stiles is so not above playing the sad puppy if he thinks it’ll work. Besides, he’s not really sure what Lydia’s implying, and honestly how lame would it be for him to show up if he wasn’t supposed to.

good thing I just invited you then. danny’s DD tonight, he’ll pick you up at 8:00.
Well. That’s that then. Apparently he’s hanging out with Danny and Lydia in…eight short hours. And maybe it’s kind of the last thing he expected to happen when he texted Lydia, and he definitely didn’t expect it to be that easy, but he’s more than okay with it. Maybe it actually is this easy, ditching the overthinking and the second guessing and just kind of going for it. It’s been a while since the last time Stiles actually put any effort into making friends – there was never a point, he had Scott and that was that, and Stiles had accepted the basic laws of high school stating that the asthmatic and the spaz were lucky to have each other and that’s the best they were going to do.

Then again, the laws of high school clearly say nothing about what happens when your best friend gets bitten by a werewolf and your worst enemy gets turned into a vengeful lizard and the gorgeous popular girl finally pays attention to you because all your mutual friends are somehow now fairy tale creatures. There are no rules for that.

So huh. Maybe Stiles should experiment. He should have a friend in Derek’s pack, he thinks, because that will make this information sharing game a hell of a lot easier. Derek’s clearly out of the question, and Isaac’s already taken…it’s a shame Erica’s missing. It’s not the first time it’s crossed Stiles mind that he and Erica probably could have been pretty baller friends if she stopped power tripping for ten seconds. He’ll make an effort with her, he decides, if she comes back. Allies are good to have, and there’s no such thing as too many werewolves willing to have your back in a fight.

Satisfied with his life plans, Stiles finds mindless ways to entertain himself for the afternoon – does the food shopping his dad’s been putting off for a few days, kills some time painstakingly separating colors in his laundry instead of just dumping the whole hamper straight into the machine, takes great pleasure in cleaning out his desk and tossing all his school notes from the last year.

The sharp, staccato beep of a horn announces Danny’s arrival sooner than Stiles would have thought, which means he has no time to panic about his life choices as he shouts a goodbye at his dad and hustles out the front door. Lydia’s already in the passenger’s seat of Danny’s Mom’s Prius, window down and one arm dangling out. Danny beeps again, like he can’t plainly see Stiles on the front stoop, and he thinks maybe this might be what high school is like for people who don’t spend all their time pretending they don’t care.

“Get a move on, Stilinski, I’m hungry,” Danny complains, but there’s a good-natured grin on his face as Stiles deliberately slows his pace and leisurely opens the back door. Lydia had texted him again warning him not to eat dinner, so it doesn’t come as a surprise when Danny pulls into Mel’s Diner.

Lydia nudges him towards one of the big round corner booths, already half full of juniors and seniors Stiles recognizes but has never, ever so much as spoken to, and yet each one of them nods when Lydia shoves Stiles in next to Harley Carter and says “everyone knows Stiles, yeah?”

“ Heard a couple of those Beavers caught up with you after Friday’s game, Stilinski,” one of the guys at the end of the table says, and unless he’s seriously mistaken it’s the starting quarterback of the football team. “We’ll have to give them a little taste of what that’s like next season.”

“I think Stiles already took care of that,” Lydia leans over, smirking conspiratorially at Stiles, “you’d be surprised.”

“Didn’t know you had it in you,” Anderson says approvingly. “Doesn’t mean we won’t kick their asses at Homecoming though.”
The guy two seats to Stiles’ left whoops and offers his knuckles to Anderson, who pounds back like this is a perfectly ordinary thing to do. Stiles waits until they’ve been dragged into a conversation about the football team’s starting line now that the seniors are graduating before turning to Lydia. The feigned interest and amusement on her face is so painfully obvious that Stiles doesn’t really understand how nobody else notices it.

She catches him looking and her smile turns into something a little more genuine, and there’s a sheepish tint to her expression as she offers him a minute shrug.

“Their attention span lasts for a week, tops,” she leans in close to whisper, long curls falling over Stiles’ arm as she tilts her head towards his. “They’ll only remember the interesting details, and the idea of you fighting back is much more noteworthy than you getting your ass kicked.”

It’s a firsthand look at how Lydia got here, how a sophomore with no claim to fame other than striking good looks and an athletic boyfriend wound up at the same table as the most popular members of both the graduating and rising senior classes. She knows the game and plays it flawlessly, and Stiles is once again, as he always is, floored by Lydia Martin.

They’re actually there to eat, which Stiles shouldn’t have been surprised by but actually kind of is, until Lydia notices the expression on his face when Harley, tiny enough that even Stiles could probably snap her in half, orders the chicken fingers entrée with extra fries and not the salad he would have guessed.

“We’re young and dumb, but we’re not stupid,” Lydia tells him, rolling her eyes after placing her own order for a turkey club. “Katie’s notorious for providing more than enough alcohol, and nobody wants to be That Guy who ends the party early cause they’ve got alcohol poisoning from drinking on an empty stomach.”

“You, Lydia Martin, are going to go far in life,” Stiles insists, like that’s news to anyone.

“Don’t let her act like it was all her idea,” Danny warns, cutting into Lydia’s smug expression. “Someone over here spent the better part of Jackson’s birthday party in the bathroom because she’d been too busy organizing to remember to eat dinner, and ever since then Jackson insisted on mandatory pregaming at the diner.”

Lydia looks torn between annoyance that Danny spilled the beans and fondness at Jackson’s uncharacteristic thoughtfulness. Even Stiles can begrudgingly admit that the other boy did right there. It wasn’t a secret how much Lydia cared about Jackson, even before the kanima showdown, but this is a blatant and unfair reminder of how much Jackson cared about Lydia in return.

Lydia’s starting to get that look on her face again, the one that means she remembers Jackson’s gone and isn’t coming back anytime soon, and Stiles refuses to be overshadowed by a memory. He wracks his brain for a subject change, and before he can manage it one walks straight into the diner with an emphatic chime of over-the-door bells.

“Isn’t that Derek Hale?” Harley hisses on his left, and the entire table immediately falls into silence as everyone except Stiles makes the sudden and very obvious effort of peering around the corners of the booth. Stiles doesn’t even bother; he recognized the leather (and seriously? It’s June.) and the brooding before the door had even closed all the way behind him.

“God he’s hot,” the girl across from Stiles whispers, and the two other girls at the table murmur their agreement. Danny, Stiles notices, is carefully silent despite the appreciative look on his face, and he’s
pleased to think that Danny remembers Derek can definitely hear them.

“He’s a murder suspect,” Anderson grumbles, petulant displeasure obvious in his tone.

“He was exonerated,” Stiles mutters crankily, because he can still see the bitch face Derek pulled when Stiles had implied the exact same thing.

“Exactly, suspect,” one of the other girls repeats. “Besides, they declared it an animal attack, and last time I checked he didn’t have claws.”

Stiles slaps a hand over his mouth to muffle the hysterical laughter threatening to bubble over, and Lydia elbows him sharply in the ribs. Danny looks like he’s not sure if he wants to laugh or run away, but Derek hasn’t made any indication that he’s heard them. He’s got his back firmly to the group as he stands at the counter talking to one of the waitresses, and the staunch line of his shoulders is no tenser than usual.

“Mmm, he might not have claws, but bet he’s a total animal in bed,” Harley leers, and she’s literally sitting there with her chin propped up on one hand, eyes blatantly fixed on Derek’s ass.

Lydia’s pointed elbow still digging into Stiles’ ribs is the only thing that keeps him from slamming his forehead repeatedly into the Formica tabletop. Danny seems to have settled on some kind of panicky hysteria, and Lydia looks like she can’t believe how completely unsmooth either of them are.

Derek accepts a to go bag from the waitress and turns to his right, away from the door and towards their back corner table, and Stiles is pretty sure his stomach just hit the floor. The table once again goes painfully still and silent as Derek stalks right back towards them. He stops short when he’s standing next to Danny, eyes on Stiles like the rest of them aren’t even there, and Stiles can feel the weight of eight additional pairs of eyes on him all at once. Super.

“I haven’t heard from Isaac in two days,” Derek says, like there’s absolutely nothing out of the ordinary about walking up to Stiles in the middle of Mel’s Diner and jumping into a conversation without so much as a fancy running into you here. Jesus, and Stiles thought he was the socially awkward one at the party.

“He’s with Scott,” Stiles grumbles, and Derek makes the same disgruntled face Stiles has been holding back all week. “They said something about going hiking, tracking, something like that. If you ask me Isaac’s been watching way too many reruns of Lost on Netflix.” He tries his best to give Derek a significant look while still not raising the suspicions of the eight high schoolers still staring at him.

Derek’s eyes flash red faster than a blink, and Stiles is pretty sure everyone else is too busy gawking at him to notice, but he thinks it was Derek’s way of saying message received. Hopefully. He’s starting to drift towards the uncomfortable edge of lingering, though, and the subtle nudge from Lydia lets him know everyone else is starting to realize it too.

“I’ll let him know you’re looking for him,” Stiles tells Derek, tapping his fingers lightly against the cell phone he’d left sitting next to his water glass, “if I see him.”

Derek nods, and it’s like the movement makes him suddenly aware of their audience. He nods again at Danny and Lydia, who look equally taken aback by the acknowledgement, and then completely floors all three of them by flashing a decidedly wolfish and completely panty-dropping (and
shamelessly fake, though Stiles is certain he’s the only one that notices) grin at the other half of the table.

Harley actually, audibly sighs, and from the glint in Derek’s eyes he definitely heard it. Stiles resists the urge to throw something at his retreating back.

“Bye Derek,” he mumbles under his breath, confident that Derek can hear him, “always a pleasure running into you and your flawless social skills.”

He looks up again to find all eight pairs of eyes back on him, and it’s slowly sinking in that the twenty-three year old murder suspect they’d all just been gossiping about had just had an entirely too-familiar conversation with Stiles.

“Oh look,” Stiles says weakly, gesturing to the two waiters approaching with heavily laden trays, “food.”

Somehow Stiles manages not to make a complete ass of himself, some combination of a generous amount of Bacardi and his newfound conviction to make Lydia see him as something other than a pathetic spaz, and he finds himself back at the same corner booth a week later, this time sandwiched between Danny and Lisa Alvarez, twice more the week after, and three days after that at a picnic table in Danny’s backyard, token Solo cup of warm keg beer in hand and the captain of the cheerleading squad snuggling into his hoody.

He’s not sure how he got here; he can’t even put it on Lydia, since Danny was the one to invite him over and Lydia’s clear on the other side of the backyard. Somehow he’s at a table with four cheerleaders and the non-werewolf half of the lacrosse team’s starting line, loudly debating the merits of convincing Danny to let them light up the fire pit, and he doesn’t even hate it.

The party winds down slowly, and Stiles isn’t sure if he’s supposed to leave (and if he is he’s walking, because he definitely forgot to remember that he drove himself here), but Lydia drops down next to where he’s sitting with his bare feet in Danny’s pool with a fresh beer for him, so he stays put.

He wakes up in the morning with his face pressed into Danny’s couch cushions in a way that he knows will leave marks on his cheek, the fingers of one hand dragging against carpet that seems much closer than it should be. Stiles opens his eyes and hates himself immediately; Danny’s basement is dimly lit, but ugh.

He isn’t, as he’d initially assumed, on the actual couch, but rather on the floor next to it, a makeshift bed cobbled out of the cushions normally lining the back of the couch. Lydia’s on the actual loveseat, curled up with her hair over her face and her feet tucked into the crack between the seat and the armrest, Stiles’ red hoody that she’d reclaimed from Christina draped over her legs like a blanket.

Harley Carter and Patrick Keegan, the other football player from Stiles’ first night at the diner, are on the couch adjacent to Lydia’s, and there’s two unidentifiable lumps on an air mattress that Stiles has no idea how anyone even had the wherewithal to blow up.

It’d been Danny stumbling down the stairs that woke him up, although everyone else is still out cold, so Stiles drags his sorry ass out of bed, ignores the churning protest of his beer-filled stomach (though he does give in to the oppressive and completely overwhelming need to piss now right the
“Do you think werewolves have to deal with hangovers?” Danny asks, holding three half-empty Solo cups as far away from his face as possible like he can’t stomach the smell. It’s the first time he’s so much as brought it up since the night Stiles dropped him off at his house.

“I’m not even sure werewolves can get drunk,” Stiles grumbles back, dumping the remnants of either beer pong or flip cup, or possibly both, and stacking the empty cups into a small tower. “Scott and I tried one night, after the first time he and Allison broke up, and he didn’t even get a buzz.”

“Right now I’m jealous,” Danny admits, “I’ll probably change my mind on that later though.”

“It depends entirely on how you look at it, I guess,” Stiles shrugs. “On the one hand, instant healing and the apparently inherited ability to pull off leather at all times. On the other, serious attitude problems and a suspicious disappearance of eyebrows.”

“Even Derek’s?” Danny snorts, snatching Stiles’ solo cup tower and tossing the lot into the garbage bag he’s been lugging around. “That’s a lot of eyebrow to lose.”

“I know,” Stiles agrees, shooting three more cups into the bag like he’s throwing a basketball. All three go wide, but Danny only rolls his eyes and scoops them up with his free hand. “You should see, it’s so weird. Every time I want to ask him where they go, except he’d totally eat my face off.”

“There are worse ways to die.”

Stiles must look scandalized, because Danny laughs and throws a cup at his head instead of into the bag.

“I mean it, I can think of worse ways to go than being ravaged by Derek Hale. At least the last thing you saw would be pure, unadulterated hotness.”


“But you don’t deny his sexiness,” Danny points out, holding the garbage bag open for Stiles’ second and thankfully more successful attempt at sinking a stack of cups.

“Conservative straight men wouldn’t deny Derek Hale’s sexiness,” he scoffs, rolling his eyes. “My eighty-six year old grandmother probably thinks Derek Hale’s sexy. Hell, dead people probably think Derek Hale’s sexy.”

Danny gives Stiles a long, searching look that Stiles’ alcohol-soaked brain absolutely cannot handle. He’ll analyze it later, when he’s not holding his breath as he wipes down the glass patio table on Danny’s deck, trying to ignore the way the beer stench makes his stomach churn.

Harley and Patrick step out long enough to thank Danny and tell him they’re leaving, the two girls from the air mattress that Stiles does not remember the names of quick on their heels. Lydia comes out twenty minutes later, barefoot and swimming in Stiles’ oversized hoody, but she drops herself into one of the cushioned lounge chairs by Danny’s pool and declares herself “supervising.”

It doesn’t take that much longer to make the backyard presentable though, and Stiles and Danny haul the two trash bags they’ve filled into the back of Stiles’ Jeep after he promises to drop them in the dumpster behind the coffee house he has every intention of stopping at on the way home.
Somehow Lydia needing a ride home turns into Danny wanting coffee too, which turns into all three of them back in Danny’s lounge chairs, Stiles in a borrowed pair of board shorts and Lydia in a bikini she apparently keeps in her oversized handbag for exactly this occasion (and really, Stiles can’t fault her for that, even if he could wrap his mind around *Lydia* in a *bikini* long enough to find girls weird). They’re fighting off the last remnants of their hangovers with iced coffees and sunglasses, stretching sore limbs in the early afternoon sunlight, and it strikes Stiles that he’s actually *friends* with Danny and Lydia.

Which is, of course, when his phone goes off with a text from Scott.

*where r u*

*danny’s*

*mahealani?*

*no the other danny we kno*

Lydia glances over at Stiles’ derisive snort, eyes narrowing critically at the phone in his hand.

“Trouble in paradise?” she asks, watching the way Stiles sighs at Scott’s response of *i dont kno ne other dannys??*

“Scott has apparently noticed he hasn’t seen me in three weeks,” Stiles grumbles, and he immediately wishes it came out slightly less bitter. Lydia and Danny exchange looks, and Stiles knows without needing to ask that they’ve noticed the same thing.

“I mean, we weren’t going to bring it up,” Danny says slowly, and it makes Stiles wonder. In the past he never really would have pinned Danny and Lydia as good friends, always assumed they were friends by circumstance, both popular and pretty and connected through Jackson more than anything else. He’d assumed they were hanging out with each other lately for the same reason that they’d been hanging out with him – Danny and Lydia both recently found themselves suddenly without a best friend, and if there’s one thing he’s learned about Lydia it’s that even though she’s friendly with what seems like every single person who shows up at any given party, she doesn’t seem particularly close to *any* of them.

Danny and Lydia, though, they’re doing that thing where they talk over his outstretched legs without saying a word, Lydia’s eyebrows and subtle twitches of Danny’s expression speaking volumes, and he’s thinking maybe he got it wrong. It takes years of friendship to get on that level of non-verbal.

It kind of makes him wonder what he’s doing here.

“What Danny means,” Lydia says, like she’s worried Stiles’ distracted silence means he’s offended, “is that we didn’t want to point out that you and Scott kind of have a reputation for being inseparable and lately you’re not living up to that expectation?”

“Scott’s been hanging out with Isaac,” Stiles shrugs. He sends Scott a quick *yea scott thats my point*, and then adds, “they’re being wolfy together.”

“And that doesn’t bother you?” Lydia frowns.
since wen r u frends w/ danny?

“Should it?” Stiles frowns back. “I don’t know. I’m not a werewolf, it’s probably nice for Scott to have someone around who can keep up with him.”

i didnt realize it was a big deal

“It’s just weird,” Danny interjects. “You two are kind of like a package deal, you know? I mean, I can’t tell you how many people see you walk into a party and ask me where McCall is.”

its not I just went 2 ur house and ur dad said u stayed @ a frends house last night

and obvs it wasnt my house and wutever i guess im just surprised

“News about Allison traveled fast, I guess? Everyone’s favorite new lacrosse captain officially on the market?” Stiles raises an eyebrow, both at Danny’s comment and Scott’s two texts, and Lydia’s eye roll is visible even through her sunglasses.

“Don’t make that face,” she scolds him, “just as many girls ask me about you. Summer’s a good look on you, people are apparently noticing that you have biceps now that you’re not hiding them under three layers of flannel, sweatshirts, and jackets.”

Stiles buries the flush of pleasure that comment sparks under his annoyance at Scott. He’s tempted to text him back that nobody else seems to think he’s not good enough to hang out with Danny, but that’ll lead to a conversation that frankly will take more effort than Stiles is willing to expend right now.

“Well then you’re doing an absolutely shit job of sending them my way,” Stiles teases, simultaneously typing a quick whatever whats up, “you’re a horrible wingwoman and I think you’re fired.”

“None of them have been good enough,” Lydia says vehemently. “I like to think at least some of us have standards.”

“Says the girl in love with Jackson,” Danny ribs, and Stiles laughs because he thinks he’s actually allowed to.

“Don’t give me that bitch tone,” Lydia shoots back, “I’ve seen some of the guys you’ve sunk low enough to consider.”

isaac and i have news on erica and boyd, come over?

“Hey, that last guy was kinda hot,” Stiles defends Danny, thumb hovering indecisively over the reply button. “Though clearly a dumbass for breaking up with you.”

“Suck up,” Lydia accuses. Stiles flashes a cheeky grin her way, and Danny laughs.

“You’re just jealous cause he’d rather have me as a wingman,” he teases Lydia.

we think we kno where they r Stiles phone buzzes, like Scott’s growing impatient with his lack of a timely response. Lydia looks pointedly at it, and Stiles takes a long drag from the iced coffee that is, by now, mostly half-melted ice.
“Scott wants me to come over so he and Isaac can give me updates on their little woodsy adventures,” Stiles admits, tossing the phone to Lydia. She shoves her sunglasses up over her forehead to perch them on the crown of her head, thumbing through the conversation with an entirely unimpressed expression on her face. “Problem is I don’t really care enough to move.”

“Tell them to come here then,” Danny offers.

“Yeah,” Lydia nods, “get the update on Erica and Boyd, plus the added bonus of blowing Scott’s mind with the fact that you actually are friends with us.”

Stiles doesn’t protest, mostly because he’s totally stuck on the matter of fact way Lydia says friends with us, and Lydia takes it upon herself to answer Scott. The exchange goes back and forth for a few texts, and Stiles makes a point of not being curious about what Scott’s saying or what Lydia’s replying with, just assumes that Lydia’s smug satisfaction means Scott eventually agrees.

Scott and Isaac let themselves in through the gate thirty minutes later to find Stiles and Danny arguing good-naturedly about the upcoming Spider-man remake, Lydia on a thickly inflated raft in the pool, holding on to the ledge so she doesn’t float too far away from the conversation. When she spots Scott and Isaac, Scott frowning and Isaac looking like he’s not sure if he’s allowed to be here, she pulls herself gracefully up off the raft and out of the pool without so much as getting her fingers wet, dropping down onto the edge of Stiles’ chair and leaving hers open for the two werewolves.

“Hey guys,” Danny says warmly, like there’s nothing remotely abnormal about either of them walking into his backyard, and Stiles bites down on a smirk. Lydia nudges at his leg until he takes the hint and drags his feet up the chair, letting her lean back against his shins.

Scott stares like he’s never seen them before.

“True or false, Andrew Garfield is going to be ten times the Spider-man Toby Maguire ever was?” Danny asks, continuing the debate he and Stiles had been in the middle of.

Scott blinks like he’s not sure how to respond to any part of this situation, and Stiles could literally kiss Danny right now because he and Lydia are laying it on thick, and that’s the kind of thing you do for your friends, and that means it’s real. He’s actually friends with them, nevermind that it’s only been four weeks, really, that they’ve known each other for years and Danny and Lydia have openly barely tolerated Stiles in the past.

This is awesome.

“At the very least he’ll be ten times hotter than Toby Maguire?” Isaac offers tentatively.

Danny grins at him.

“That’s what I said,” Lydia tells them, shifting her weight so Stiles’ knees aren’t quite so blunt against her shoulder blades. It’s a lot of smooth, warm skin against his, and it’s a more than sufficient distraction from the way Scott looks like he’s swallowed a whole lemon

“A marathon and a midnight release is the only way to settle this,” Stiles suggestions, and Lydia and Danny both agree so readily that even Stiles is surprised. Awesome. “Anyway, we still have a few weeks for that. What’s up with you guys, what’d you find?”
Isaac immediately defers to Scott, and he’s still standing at Scott’s right shoulder, just behind him, like he still thinks he’s Scott’s second in command. Stiles has no doubt he is, really, except for the fact that he’s pretty sure you’re not allowed to be in two packs at once, and last he checked Isaac’s still calling Derek his Alpha.

*are you allowed to be in two packs at once?* he texts Derek, ignoring the way Scott suddenly seems to notice that coming all the way here meant Lydia and Danny were also going to be privy to his update.

“*You might as well just say it,*” he finally tells Scott. “They both know everything anyway.”

“*Everything?*” Scott balks, glancing at Danny, who shrugs nonchalantly in response.

“*Everything,*” Stiles agrees. “*If Jackson was still here they’d probably be part of whichever pack he picked, so what difference does it make?*”

Scott looks decidedly unhappy to hear it, but Stiles’ attention is stuck on Isaac, who looks like the option of *picking* a pack hadn’t occurred to him before now. Shit, Stiles so did not want to be the one to plant that idea in his head.

no. he’s going to have to pick one sooner or later.

Great.

“We found a trail,” Scott says finally. “*About a week ago. Isaac had found one right after everything, but it went cold. And then we found the one again last week, and that went cold too.*”

“So which part of that makes it noteworthy now?” Lydia asks, and it’s a completely valid question, but the way she says it is just so. Stiles nudges her thigh lightly with the side of his foot, and she tosses a challenging look over her shoulder at him.

“We found another trail last night,” Scott continues, a hard edge to his voice like he’s talking right over Lydia’s interruption, “*only this time we’re pretty sure it was deliberate.*”

“*Because…*” Stiles prompts, frowning. He’s already steps ahead of Scott’s story, filling in dots from the last thing they knew about Erica and Boyd leaving to go find another pack, getting captured and then released from the Argent’s basement, presumably following through on their plan to leave instead of running back to Derek. There’s only two reasons why someone would deliberately leave a trail to two missing werewolves, especially when he’s certain Scott and Isaac haven’t been subtle in their search.

“We found the cuff of the jacket Erica was wearing,” Isaac fills in, pulling the scrap of black fabric from his back pocket. “Wedged between two rocks, like it was left there on purpose.”

“So either Erica ripped it off hoping you’d find it and eventually her, or the Alpha pack has them and is trying to lure you into a trap,” Stiles continues, sighing.

Scott nods. “Yeah, I figured it was probably a trap too, but if it’s not…”

Stiles doesn’t bother asking why Scott’s so hell-bent on finding Erica and Boyd. Even if it wasn’t important to Isaac, which it clearly is, some part of Scott feels responsible for Derek’s Betas. He’s
been friends with Scott long enough, they don’t need to talk about it – the guilt twisting Scott’s face as he looks at the fabric in Isaac’s hand is enough.

“What did Derek say about it?” Stiles asks, and the looks exchanged between Isaac and Scott make him want to shove them both face-first into Danny’s pool.

“We came here first,” Isaac admits. “Derek’s kind of, uh, mad at me?”

Even Danny rolls his eyes at that.

“I can’t imagine why,” Stiles mumbles. He plucks his phone off his lap and flips to Derek’s last text, sending him a quick *dumb and dumber have news on E&B, should I send them your way or are you still firmly Not Speaking to Scott?

*I’m already in town, are they still with you? I can come there*

“So, Danny,” Stiles sighs, glancing up with the best puppy dog eyes he can muster. “How do you feel about having an alpha werewolf at your house?”

“Depends entirely on whether or not he’ll be putting on another performance,” Danny drawls lazily, and Stiles and Lydia both laugh.

yeah but we’re at danny’s, 48 northwood dr, just let yourself in the gate

*fine, 20 minutes*

“I can’t make any promises,” he laughs before turning back to where Scott and Isaac are still standing with matching apprehensive expressions. “You two might as well sit,” he gestures to the empty lounge chair Lydia had vacated.

“Well, since this is clearly about to turn into another party,” Lydia pushes herself upright, turning to Danny, “did we actually tap the keg last night, or do we still have some we need to finish off.”

“There should be some left, Stiles and I dragged it into the kitchen,” he nods. “Get one for me?”

Lydia nods as she gets her feet under her, picking up both hers and Stiles’ empty coffee cups. “Stiles?”

“Sure,” he shrugs, because why the hell not. Who knows, maybe Derek’ll be just a bit more sufferable with a beer or two in him.

Scott lowers himself into the lounge chair with his judgiest of bitch faces, and Stiles returns his stare with a particularly exaggerated frown. Scott’s expression says nothing more than *what the fuck*, and Stiles responds with a half-hearted shrug and slight jerk of his chin in Isaac’s direction. Scott glares like he can’t even believe they’re having this discussion, and Stiles rolls his eyes because honestly, Scott, it’s really not a big deal so stop acting like it is.

“You guys didn’t want, did you?” Lydia asks, returning with three Solo cups balanced between two hands like she’s had a lot of practice, frowning at Scott and Isaac like she’s only just realized how rude it was to not offer any to the two of them. “Only, I kind of assumed werewolves couldn’t get drunk.”
“Nah, you’re right,” Isaac assures her. “At least, I think you’re right.”

Scott looks at Stiles like he’s drinking straight poison when he accepts his cup from Lydia, and he knows Scott’s not opposed to indulging in a drink or two, so Stiles can’t help but throw his free hand up in exasperation and shove himself up off the lounge chair.

“Scott, can I borrow you for a minute,” he snaps, yanking his friend up by the collar without waiting for a reply. He leads Scott around to the grass on the other side of the deck, not far enough away that Isaac won’t hear but far enough to at least give them an illusion of privacy.

“What is your deal,” he hisses.

“What’s my deal?” Scott snaps back. “You’re at Danny Mahealani’s house, where you apparently spent the night after a rager, judging by the way it smells back here, drinking his leftover beer that Lydia Martin hand delivered to you, and you’re asking what my deal is?”

“Yup,” Stiles nods. “Because the only thing I got out of that was Stiles, you’re hanging out with people who aren’t me and what gives?”

Scott gapes like a fish, and the flash of warm endearment is enough of a reminder that this is Scott, and even when he’s being a jealously possessive puppy, he’s still a damn puppy.

“Stop looking at me like that,” Stiles sighs, all the fight going out of him in one fell swoop. “You knew I was studying with Lydia during finals week, and I told you about filling Danny in too.”

“Yeah but studying with Lydia and drinking day beers at Danny’s house are two totally different things,” Scott accuses, like Stiles hasn’t noticed.

“You were busy,” Stiles mutters, and it’s not an accusation, it’s really not. “I get it, I know you and Isaac are all bonding over woldom, and that you’re helping him look for Erica and Boyd. I get why that’s important to you, I do. But dude, you can only blow me off so many times before I take the hint and try somewhere else. I texted Lydia, and she and Danny brought me to a party, and it was fun, so the next time they asked I said yes. And here we are.”

“Troy Murphy’s party last week?” Scott hisses, and he sounds like he’s not sure if he’s annoyed or impressed. “The video of Ramirez falling down the stairs, rolling into a perfect somersault, and walking away like nothing happened? That went viral on YouTube?”

“Was actually even better in real life,” Stiles confirms, “the video cut too soon, he kept walking straight into the kitchen, puked in the sink as he walked by, and kept going back out into the backyard like business as usual.”

“Ew,” Scott’s nose is wrinkled distastefully, but Stiles knows when he’s won, and he’s almost there.

“Dude, I know it’s weird,” he admits, “but it’s kind of nice, you know? Nobody who might accidentally bite me if I piss them off, nobody shoving me into walls. Last night I spent two hours talking to a couple cheerleaders, and not once did they ask me if I was worried that Gerard Argent’s body hasn’t turned up yet, or whether or not I think Peter’s going to try to kill us all again.”

Scott’s waver expression settles on something like guilt, and it seals the deal that Stiles has successfully smoothed this over. Score one for Stilinski.
“You’re right,” Scott concedes, “you’re totally right. And I’m totally acting like an ass, I’m sorry.”

“Damn right you are,” Stiles nods decisively, flashing a grin so Scott knows he’s kidding. “Now come on, if I lose my seat because Derek beats me to it I will shamelessly steal yours and you’ll be the awkward standing guy.”

Scott makes a face like that’s all the motivation he needs, and as they make their way back around to the pool side all three teens make quick and obvious attempts to pretend like they weren’t trying (and in Isaac’s case, probably succeeding) to listen in.

“You guys are shameless,” he tells them, dropping back into his chair and helping himself to a sip of his lukewarm beer. “And this is gross, can’t we pump it into a pitcher and stick it in the fridge or something?”

“I’ll do it,” Lydia volunteers. Danny just toasts his cup in her general direction, taking a long drag and making a face not unlike the one Stiles was still sporting.

“Ugh, you’re right,” he nods. “Still, my cousin’s swinging by to pick the keg up when he gets off work, he has to return the tap by the end of the day, so we might as well finish it while we still have it.”

“I really hope there’s some secret special way for werewolves to get drunk,” Isaac sighs, pouting at the Solo cup in Stiles’ hand. “I never did get around to it before I took the bite.”

“Stiles and I were talking about that earlier,” Danny tells him. “And I’ve come up with a theory. If it doesn’t work because of your healing whatever skills, maybe you just have to be one step up on that.”

“So what, chug a bottle of Jack and hope it lasts longer than five minutes?” Scott looks entirely repulsed by the idea, and Stiles remembers with a laugh the face Scott made the first time they’d helped themselves to a sip of the Sheriff’s whiskey.

“We’ll have to ask Derek,” Stiles suggests, “I have a feeling if there’s a loophole in werewolf healing practices, he knows it.”

“Why?”

Stiles shrugs. “I don’t know, I just feel like instant healing might make it difficult to get a tattoo in the conventional way. His body would push the ink back out just as fast as the gun pushed it in, and it would just go nowhere fast.”

Isaac and Scott both look faintly repulsed, like they’ve never considered it before and now have to wrestle with the question of how exactly Derek managed it. The options are pretty grim – Stiles knows, he’s considered them before.

He knows when Derek arrives well before the Alpha shoves open the back gate – Isaac tenses up like he’s just been caught sneaking into the girls’ locker room, and Scott’s face hardens into something that reeks of offense and irritation. It’s not remotely a surprise when Derek lets himself in then, crossing the space between them with his immense displeasure at the situation rolling off him in waves.

“Well, if it isn’t Beacon Hills’ favorite Alpha,” Stiles teases, because someone has to break the
tension. “Drink?”

“I’ll have better luck inhaling the fumes from this backyard,” Derek grumbles, and Stiles is very, very careful to hold back his reaction when Derek drops heavily onto the bottom half of the chair Stiles himself is sitting in. “You’re lucky your parents aren’t wolves,” he tells Danny, raising an eyebrow at him.

“That would probably make it difficult to get away with things,” Danny agrees, making a pretty solid effort at sounding completely at ease. Stiles grins reassuringly at him.

Derek turns away with a nod, like he’s gotten the required niceties out of the way, and levels a searching look on Isaac, who shrinks away like he’s being punished, and Scott, who glares right back and shifts closer to Isaac. If this dissolves into a territorial showdown between Alpha and Wannabe-Alpha Stiles is going to lose it completely.

“Well?” Derek finally snaps, raising his eyebrows expectantly at the two Betas opposite him. Stiles hides his exasperation behind the rim of his cup, gulping down another long pull, because even lukewarm beer is better than nothing in this situation.

Scott launches into an explanation that is both ten times more aggressive and ten times more deferential than his original one to Stiles, and as interesting a contradiction as it is, Stiles doesn’t have the attention span to listen twice. He’s staring at his thigh where Danny’s shorts have ridden up a bit, trying to decide if he’s gotten any kind of tan whatsoever today, when he notices the skin he’s comparing his to is Derek’s.

Derek’s enormous bicep, in particular, because Derek is not wearing his leather jacket. Derek is, in fact, wearing nothing more than jeans, sneakers, and a shockingly white t-shirt, and it’s the least-imposing he’s ever seen the Alpha before. And suddenly that’s a million times more fascinating than his own tanning ability (because pale as he might be now, his mother was a hundred percent Italian, dammit, and he can occasionally be something other than pasty white).

He’s disrupted yet again by the arrival of Lydia, standing on the edge of the deck and glaring at Derek like he’s a particularly bothersome gnat she’d like to be rid of. Stiles has seen that look dozens of times before, most commonly when another girl made the horrendous mistake of attempting to flirt with Jackson while Lydia was around.

And now she’s glaring at Derek, like she’s pissed he’s stolen her spot on Stiles’ chair, and holy crap does that hit like a blow to the gut. Lydia is getting territorial over Stiles. Like, visibly so, visibly enough that even Derek notices. He’s staring back at her with an entirely bemused expression on his face, watching Lydia as she draws close enough to swap Stiles’ mostly empty cup for a fuller, miraculously cold one. She settles down on the end of Danny’s chaise, holding out a fresh beer for him too, and keeps her eyes on the back of Derek’s head.

“Is that everything?” he says to Scott, sitting forward like he’s suddenly itching to move, to be anywhere other than that lounge chair or this backyard. Stiles tries not to feel too giddy about it.

“Yeah?” Scott shrugs. “Mostly. We just wanted to know if you think it’s a trap or if we should follow it.”

“I’m not your Alpha,” Derek growls

“You’re Isaac’s,” Scott protests, and Stiles wonders if Scott genuinely hasn’t noticed. Of course he
hasn’t, Scott’s not stupid but he’s not exactly the most in tune with other people either, and Jesus, Stiles should have brought it up sooner. Preferably before Scott gave Derek the opportunity to kill him. Christ, they were going to have a hard time hiding the bloodstains from Danny’s parents.

Maybe Derek can smell the panic from Stiles’ side of the chair, or maybe he just notices the way Stiles’ heartbeat takes off in nervous anticipation of a fight, because he twitches slightly in Stiles’ direction before exhaling slowly. The red fades from his eyes along with the rush of air, claws giving way to human fingernails, and he glances sideways at Stiles before turning back to Isaac.

“Are you sure about that?”

Nobody makes a sound as Derek stalks back out the way he came, slamming the wooden gate hard enough behind him that the entire fence wobbles.

“I’m moving to Hawaii,” Stiles sighs, lolling his head to the side to give Danny a pleading look.

“Danny, tell me they don’t have werewolves in Hawaii.”

His life falls into something of a pattern after that, but for the first time in a while it’s a pattern Stiles can live with. Scott makes a point of seeing him at least once a week, sometimes with Isaac and sometimes without, and Stiles can deal with it. They’re still going out almost every day, canvassing the woods for any sign of Erica and Boyd, but other than a few more scraps of Erica’s jacket they don’t find much in the way of a lead, and even those trails run cold after a few days.

Derek, after the fiasco in Danny’s backyard, firmly reinstates his policy of only communicating with Stiles. He shows up in Stiles’ bedroom every Wednesday like clockwork, leaning against the wall by Stiles’ window just long enough to admit he’s got mostly nothing in the way of updates; Erica and Boyd still missing, Isaac still dancing the line between Scott’s and Derek’s packs, Peter still making nice like he doesn’t have some ulterior motive, the Alpha pack still lurking in the shadows without making a move. Stiles tells him mostly the same back, Isaac and Scott have nothing to report on their daily hunts, Gerard’s body hasn’t turned up and the sheriff’s department has no leads, everything seems suspiciously quiet. Derek’s rarely there for more than ten minutes, and Stiles is more than content to keep it that way.

He sees Lydia, or Danny, or Lydia and Danny, almost every day. The summer crowd seems to operate on some kind of rotation, like they’ve compared notes to see exactly whose parents would be gone on which days, making sure there’s at least two parties a week. He doesn’t bother asking where the alcohol comes from, doesn’t question how he somehow got worked into the cycle of designated drivers, and doesn’t complain when he starts getting mass texts from numbers he doesn’t recognize, invitations straight from the source instead of through Lydia or Danny.

All in all, it’s probably the best summer Stiles has had in years, really. His only complaint is the complete stalemate he’s found himself at with Lydia, stalled out solidly in the friend zone with absolutely no idea how to push forward. He’s completely certain they’re definitely friends – real friends, like Lydia and Danny, or how Lydia was with Allison, and not just the friendly way Lydia breezes from person to person in various backyards. She calls him one afternoon while she’s driving home from a trip to a mall forty five minutes from Beacon Hills, admitting when he finally asks that she didn’t really have a reason, just wanted someone to talk to on the drive home, and that seals the deal for him.

They’re friends. Awesome. Now what?
He’s distracted by the sharp rap of Derek’s knuckles against his window frame; Stiles isn’t sure how he’d finally gotten the werewolf to announce his arrival, but it was a success on his part. He gestured for Derek to let himself in, closing his laptop and twisting around in his desk chair, and watches with no small amount of surprise as Derek drops down into the chair by his bed instead of bracing against his usual patch of wall.

“What’s up?” he asks, because the disruption in their routine can only mean that something’s wrong.

Derek doesn’t say anything for a few long moments, and Stiles busies himself with trying to guess where the problem is. He’d know if there was any update on Gerard, so it’s not that, and he’s pretty sure he’d have picked up on some weird news if the Alpha pack was making a move. Isaac and Scott are still predominantly manning the wolf-hunt front, which narrows it down to only…

“Do you ever talk to Isaac?” Derek says finally. It sounds like the question takes a lot out of him, like saying it out loud to Stiles means he’s officially admitting out loud that he has a problem he can’t solve on his own, and Stiles is almost tempted to mock him for it. Almost, until he notices that somewhere under Derek’s bristly exterior gruffness is something that looks like genuine concern, and maybe even genuine hurt, and that stops Stiles in his tracks. He’s not above kicking a man when he’s down, but only in the event that it’ll somehow help Stiles. No point in doing it just for fun.

“Like, communicate verbally and without using Scott as a medium, or actually talk to him about substantial life issues?” he clarifies, because he’s still not completely a saint.

Derek glares at him.

“You know what I mean,” he growls.

“No,” Stiles shakes his head. “No, and I haven’t talked to Scott about it either. The big stalling point, if I had to guess, is that for all his posturing Scott isn’t actually an Alpha.”

“That’s one of the problems,” Derek admits. “If Isaac officially declares his allegiance to Scott it’ll affect Scott’s power. It won’t make him an Alpha, only inheriting the title from another Alpha can do that, but it’ll still give him a boost. In this case maybe even enough of a boost to take on one of the Alphas still lurking the woods here, at which point he actually would become a real Alpha with Isaac as his actual Beta.”

“I’m still not sure if that’s a good thing,” Stiles confesses. Derek raises an eyebrow and sits back slightly, like he hadn’t expected Stiles to be anything but gung-ho about Scott’s promotion, but Stiles just shakes his head.

“I do think Scott’ll make a good Alpha. It didn’t really surprise me that he turned you down, and Isaac’s little hero-worship fixation doesn’t either. I just don’t know if he’s ready for it quite yet.” Stiles sighs, scrubs a hand over his head. He has no idea why he’s telling Derek any of this, how they somehow landed in Bizarro World Confession Time instead of their usual perfunctory business-esque meeting. It’s kind of…it’s nice, though. He has Scott for supernatural talk, Lydia and Danny for normal teenage human talk, but he’s never had an outlet for problems.

“He’s sixteen,” Derek nods, like that more than summarizes everything Stiles just said. It kind of does. “He’s just a kid.”

“Hey,” Stiles argues defensively, “I’m sixteen, and I helped find and kill a murderer, got kidnapped
and beat soundly by a grown man, watched a classmate die twice before miraculously coming back to life both times, and I’ve saved your sorry ass more than once. Give the kids some credit.”

Derek makes a face like he sorely wants to protest, but there’s the barest hint of a smirk that Stiles thinks means Derek’s kind of amused. Hey, he’ll take it.

“Isaac has to make a choice though,” Derek insists, shaking his head and schooling his expression into something more serious. “Sooner, rather than later. He can’t keep doing this.”

“Have you talked to him about it?” Stiles asks.

Derek looks at him like he’s an idiot.

“No, but really,” Stiles protests. “I mean, we don’t know what Isaac thinks. Maybe he thinks he has to choose.”

“He does have to choose,” Derek says flatly, like Stiles hasn’t been listening.

“I mean like, maybe he thinks that you’re making him pick between you and Scott. Not as his Alpha,” he says quickly, holding up a hand before Derek can interrupt him again, “but in general. Like if he chooses you as his Alpha he can’t be friends with Scott anymore, and he’s stalling on declaring anything one way or another because he’s trying to prolong their friendship for as long as he can.”

“I wouldn’t,” Derek frowns, and he looks kind of offended. “I wouldn’t tell Isaac who he is and isn’t allowed to be friends with, that’s not what being an Alpha is about. Scott’s good for Isaac, I’m glad he has someone to look up to.”

“Isaac looks up to you,” Stiles says carefully. He wasn’t sure until after he said it, but he’s pretty sure he hit the nail on the head considering the way Derek slumps like his whole body’s just deflated all at once. “He does, do you really not know that?”

“I would,” Derek starts to protest, and Stiles almost immediately starts shaking his head. “But I’m not exactly role model material, Stiles.”

“Never mind,” he insists. “I know you know about Isaac’s dad and everything, but did you know Isaac had an older brother too?”

Derek shakes his head.

“He died,” Stiles says simply, because it’s not his story to tell. “A few years back. I didn’t really know Isaac, but you know, big news, small town, you hear things. And I think maybe Isaac really needs someone who can be there for him like that. Obviously you’re not ready to be anyone’s father figure, but you’ve got older brother written all over you.”

Something twists sharp and sudden in Derek’s face, and Stiles desperately wishes he could backtrack just enough to take the end of that sentence back. It’s all over Derek’s suddenly agonized expression, and Stiles has read the incident reports on the Hale fire, he knows there were kids in the house. Of course Derek’s older brother material…he’s been one before.

“Did you…” he says quietly, because he can’t keep his fucking mouth shut sometimes.
Derek squeezes his eyes shut and nods.

“Madeline was twelve,” he whispers. “Blake was only…”

_Eight._ Stiles mind fills in helplessly, because now that he’s brought it up he remembers the reports he read. Both Derek’s parents, his grandmother, two aunts and an uncle, the Hale’s oldest son and youngest two children, and a baby cousin. A _baby._

“I…sorry…” Stiles mumbles, “I didn’t mean to…I’m…”

“You’re right though,” Derek nods. “Isaac could use…Alex was four years older than me. He was an absolute shit half the time, beat me up just because he could, ganged up with Laura until I was an easier target than shooting fish in a barrel, and I still idolized the hell out of him.”

He glances up at Stiles, who’s thunderstruck and mortified and kind of honored beyond all belief that Derek came to him with this, talked to him about it. Any port in a storm, maybe, but still. He’s flattered, and maybe a little bit heartbroken.

Derek kind of has that effect on people.

“Talk to Isaac,” he says quietly, because he doesn’t really know where else to go from here. “Last I heard he was avoiding you because he thought you were mad at him, so at the very least clear that up. And maybe stop being such a dick to him? I get the idea of tough love and all that, but I think Isaac’s had more tough love than any one person deserves in their lifetime.”

“Yeah,” Derek nods. “Yeah, I’m gonna go do that.”

He gets up, like he means _right this very second_, and Stiles isn’t really about to stop him. They’re hovering in this weird kind of aftershock though, and it’s the kind of atmosphere that Stiles can’t help but shatter because he can’t handle it.

“And Derek,” he calls, waiting until the werewolf already has one leg over the edge of Stiles’ windowsill. “Middle child syndrome explains _boatloads_ of your personality defects.”

He has to duck to narrowly avoid being nailed in the head by a book Derek scoops off the floor and hurls his way, but the tension is gone from the Alpha’s shoulders as he disappears through the window, and Stiles’ laughter follows him out.

Stiles somehow comes to the conclusion that he can kill two birds with one stone by going to Lydia with his baffling Derek experience: it’ll give him a chance to hash out the weirdness with an expert, and it might help in advancing their _relationship_, whatever that might be, to the next level. Maybe.

It’s a theory, and he’s a little desperate, and he’ll take it. He calls Lydia and purposely hedges when she asks what’s up, knowing it’ll pique her interest like nothing else.

“I should probably come over there,” Lydia suggests, and Stiles makes sure to stay absolutely silent as he pulls a few victory fist pumps. “Because you’re clearly lying through your teeth in an effort to get me to pay attention to you.”

“I’m not even upset,” Stiles tells her, “just proud that you’re smart enough to know. Come over,
“You should have led with that,” Lydia scolds. “That’s an immediate attention-grabber, honestly Stiles, I thought I trained you better than that.”

“I was under the impression you didn’t like him,” Stiles defends himself, “thought I’d have to trick you over here some other way.”

“The opportunity to hear you bitch and gossip about someone that isn’t Scott is intriguing enough,” she insists, “and Jesus Christ Grandma the gas pedal is the tall skinny one.”

“I don’t know why it ever surprised me that you drive like a bat out of hell,” Stiles tells her conversationally, listening to the unmistakable engine rev of Lydia swerving into the shoulder to cut off whoever isn’t driving up to her standards. “You definitely present the kind of ice cool façade that will ultimately end in you snapping and killing us all.”

“Serial murder isn’t funny anymore,” Lydia grumbles back, “we’ve witnessed it firsthand.”

“On the contrary,” Stiles argues, “it has to be funny now, because the alternative is mass hysteria and Lydia, mass hysteria is not a good look on any of us.”

They bicker amiably as Lydia cuts off two more drivers, definitely commits to running a yellow that turned red long before she drove through it, and calmly asks Stiles if her official position as favorite girl of the son of the Beacon Hills Sheriff will get her exempt from speeding tickets.

“I stole a police transport van and chained up your boyfriend in the cargo bay,” Stiles reminds her, stumbling down the stairs to unlock the front door. “I think I have officially used up all my get out of jail free cards. Literally.”

“Well,” Lydia scoffs primly, sliding her phone into her pocket and brushing a perfunctory kiss on Stiles’ cheek as she breezes through the doorway. “I’ll just have to count on my sweet disposition and good looks to keep charming my way out of them.”

“I’ll see about getting you a PBA card,” Stiles promises dryly, rolling his eyes and following Lydia up the stairs. “Although something tells me you kind of enjoy the challenge.”

“Plus,” she leans back, eyes twinkling mischievously, “your dad had to hire a lot of young new deputies after the whole thing with Matt. Fresh out of the Academy and still looking particularly good in their new uniforms.”

“You’re incorrigible,” he tells her, and she laughs like it’s a compliment.

“It’s why you like me.” She’s not wrong. “So, tell me about your issues with the king of the wild things.”

Stiles gets this little flash of a picture, Derek as a kid, still the youngest because his sister hasn’t been born yet, wedged into the corner of a couch next to a little miniature version of Laura, an older woman leaning in close to show them the pages of the book she’s reading from, and oh. Stiles knows, he just knows, that Derek, before fire and fury burned everything innocent out of him, just loved Where the Wild Things Are.

His lungs do something funny, like he took a breath that didn’t have enough oxygen and now they’re
seizing around nothing, and Lydia’s looking at him like she’s going to start drawing her own
conclusions if he doesn’t start talking. He shakes off whatever lingering mental images his overactive
imagination is providing (four-year-old Derek in an oversized Max costume on Halloween, Jesus
fucking Christ) and forces himself to drop down onto the floor next to her.

“So you know how he comes over every week and we do the Beacon Hills Werewolves version of
the nightly news?”

Lydia nods, and Stiles is pretty sure he’s never actually told her that before, so apparently everyone
in his life is a grade A creep.

“Normally it’s like an in and out, rapidfire exchange of information, don’t let the windowsill land on
your tail as you haul ass out of here kind of scenario,” he explains, because Derek’s weekly visits
have given Stiles a whole new appreciation for the phrase ‘wham bam thank you ma’am.’

“And one of you broke the status quo and now it’s weird?”

“He asked for advice. He pouted, then asked for advice, told me about his family, and then left
saying he was actually going to do what I suggested he should, and Lyds it was so, so weird because
I have no idea where in all of hell that came from.”

Lydia’s looking at him kind of funny, some cross between amusement and irritation, and Stiles lets
his imagination run away with him for a minute. Lets him imagine that she’s amused because she
thinks his wayward rambling’s kind of cute, that the irritation stems from him paying so much
attention to someone that isn’t her (although Derek, seriously, like he’s in any way competition for
Stiles’ affections).

“It must be lonely,” she says quietly. “Living with the knowledge that everyone you’ve ever known
in your life has either died or voluntarily abandoned you.”

“And the one person who hasn’t is the one you thought you, you know, killed,” Stiles adds, because
living with a once beloved Uncle who went mad, killed his last remaining niece, and then burned
until his throat was slit only to rise from the grave again probably wasn’t really such a picnic.

Lydia nods, and with that simple movement goes all of Stiles’ desire to overanalyze the stupid
situation. Whooshes right out of him like water through an open drain, leaving him frowning sullenly
at the chair Derek had been sitting in. Lydia’s right, she’s so right, he’s focused a stupid amount of
energy on trying to figure out why Derek would talk to him of all people. As if Derek had anyone
else in the entire world to even try with. And great, good, now there’s a low burn of guilt in his
stomach.

“Did you ever think about what house you’d be sorted into?”

Every time Stiles thinks he has a handle on Lydia, who could easily give Derek a run for his money
as the most multifaceted person Stiles has ever met, Lydia goes and pulls something new on him; a
whole encyclopedia’s worth of knowledge on classic horror movies, a knitting habit, a well-buried
secret love of all things Harry Potter. He knew this one already, learned it two weeks ago when he
showed up twenty minutes early at her house and found her bawling her eyes out in front of DH Part
II, but it still inspires a small thrill of interest.

“Pottermore went Ravenclaw,” he reminds her, because they’ve already confessed to their no-shame
excitement over the website’s launch, almost immediately followed by crushing disappointment at its
“Dollars to doughnuts you’d be a four-way hatstall,” Lydia argues. Stiles rolls his head sideways where it’d been lolling back against his desk, raising an eyebrow at her. “You’re stupid brave, boy-who-runs-with-wolves, fiercely loyal to people you love, overwhelmingly curious and clever, but you’ve also definitely got a ruthlessly cunning streak. I go back and forth all the time on which house I think you’d be in.”

“I always wanted to be in Slytherin when I was younger,” he admits, because he did. “It used to make me so angry that people would just cast the net accusation of Slytherin equals future Death Eater. I wanted so badly for J.K. Rowling to have one of the students step up in the eleventh hour and save the day, or help Harry, or something, just to prove to people that not all Slytherins were evil.”

“That is exactly my point,” Lydia says smugly.

“I didn’t realize you had one.”

“Of course I did. My point is that you look at a freshly turned werewolf and still see your dopey best friend, you look at a batshit girl crying her way to insanity and still think she’s beautiful, you look at people and see people, not whatever issues they’re buried in. And Derek, whether he’s realizes that’s why he’s talking to you or not, really needs someone to look at him and see something more than a scared little boy pretending to be something he’s not and failing spectacularly at it.”

Well that’s – Stiles doesn’t even know where to start, the painfully accurate description of Derek, the fairly glowing review of his character, or the way Lydia’s assessment has sparked a warm thrill through him that settled low and hot in his ribcage.

He shifts gears, because Stiles is a professional at switching topics to take obsessive interest in, and spends the rest of the evening wondering what Lydia sees when she looks at him.

The next few Wednesday updates aren’t quite as perfunctory as they once were. Derek sticks around just a little bit longer sometimes, and they discuss more than just the bare-bones facts. He talks about some of the tracking he himself has done, searching for signs of Erica and Boyd, recounts stories of Peter’s behavior that they both analyze to shreds, speculates with Stiles on how Gerard survived and where he is now.

Derek’s appearance at Stiles’ window disrupts Stiles’ aimless internet browsing, and he watches the werewolf balance on the sill for a few seconds before shoving his way inside. It’s only once Derek’s in, sprawled ungainly across the floor with his head and shoulders propped against the wall, does Stiles realize that today is definitely not Wednesday.

And, of course, that the rusty red stains on Derek’s green t-shirt are definitely blood, and the smatter of wounds Stiles can see through what he now realizes are undoubtedly claw-induced tears in the fabric are not healing like they should.

“Jesus,” he hisses, throwing himself out of his desk chair to land on his knees next to Derek. “What the fuck?”

“Found the Alphas,” Derek pants, grinding the heels of his hands against the carpet like he’s trying
(unsuccessfully) to push himself further upright. “Or, I guess, one of them found me. Told me to stop looking for Erica and Boyd, then made sure I wouldn’t forget.”

“And you suddenly believe so strongly in our information sharing circle that you came straight here rather than going home, or to, I don’t know, a doctor?” Stiles challenges. He’s frazzled with the need to do something, to tug Derek’s shirt off and clean the scrapes littering his torso, or drag him down the stairs and haul his ass to the hospital or Deaton’s.

“Your house was closest,” Derek grumbles defensively, and Stiles freezes, because he swears, just for a second, that what Derek actually meant was ‘your house was safest.’

Which is, of course, patently ridiculous, because Derek has already made it abundantly clear that he doesn’t trust Stiles worth a damn, and there’s absolutely no reason at all he would feel any safer at Stiles’ house than he would his own den.

“Yeah, well, lucky for you we have a well-stocked first aid kit here in the Stilinski household.”

Derek rolls his eyes, mutters something that sounds suspiciously like “I can’t imagine why,” and ignores the glare Stiles shoots him on his way out the bedroom door.

He texts Scott on his way to the bathroom, call off search STAT, u and isaac dont leave ur house til i give u the all clear, and then again, on his way back with oversized plastic bin Melissa McCall personally helps Stiles keep stocked, adds D attacked by alpha, told to stop looking or else.

Stiles comes back into his room to find Derek shirtless and braced against his bed, head lolling back against the mattress like it takes too much effort to hold it up on his own.

“You’re going to get blood all over my sheets,” Stiles whines, because the alternative is panic and he’s not ready to panic over Derek Hale quite yet. Derek blinks hazy eyes open and stares at him like he can’t quite muster a glare, and it’s hardly the worst Stiles has ever seen him look but it still sends a quiet note of terror through him.

“Yeah, yeah, why is it you can still threaten to rip my throat out without even opening your mouth,” Stiles complains at him, even though Derek’s face is kittens in comparison to his usual intensity.

“Practice,” Derek grumbles, and Stiles chuffs out a laugh as he drops to his knees again and opens up the first aid kit.

“Please tell me you at least got one hit in,” he gripes, studying the marks across Derek’s skin. Most of them look fairly shallow, surface wounds more than anything else, but there’s a set of four gashes trailing over his right shoulder that look like someone dug their claws in deep and dragged. Stiles doesn’t know what to do about those, doesn’t know how the Alpha-wounds-don’t-super-heal rule works when it’s two Alphas in the equation, so he starts with the shallow scrapes he can handle.

Derek growls at the first swipe of a hydrogen peroxide-soaked cotton ball against his shredded flesh, and Stiles mock-growls right back.

“Don’t be a baby,” he snaps, batting Derek’s hand away with his own before pressing down again with the cotton ball. “If your stupid werewolf healing doesn’t cure Alpha-induced injuries then whose to say it’ll work on Alpha-injury-induced infections?”

“I don’t understand the way your brain works,” Derek protests through gritted teeth. Admittedly, he
probably doesn’t have much experience with cleaning injuries, seeing as they don’t usually last long enough for them to be given any proper attention, but honestly, the guy’s been shot, more than once, he should be able to handle a little medicine burn.

“Which I will continue to use to my advantage for as long as possible,” Stiles shoots back. “Dude, if you don’t stop squirming I will sit on you, and that will be extremely unpleasant for both of us so for the love of my dignity, hold still.”

Derek growls again, like the threat of Stiles touching him more than necessary is acutely unbearable, and manages to settle into some kind of hyper-tension that keeps him at least mostly still. Stiles makes quick work of the remaining scrapes, and he’s secretly pleased to see that while they’re not healing at the rapid fire rate they normally would most of the cuts seem narrower and shorter, like the shallowest edges have healed quicker than the deeper center, and it’s progress. He tapes long pieces of gauze over them anyway, because there’s no point in all that griping and flinching if Derek’s just going to go and get an infection anyway, until all that’s left are the marks trailing over his shoulder.

“Sit up,” he urges quietly, nudging Derek’s arm well below where the gashes end, and the face the werewolf makes in response makes the part of Stiles that hates seeing people in pain squirm uncomfortably. It’s obvious from the way Derek’s stomach shifts that the effort of sitting up straight puts a stupid amount of strain on the cuts that run diagonally across his abs, and Stiles suffers the grimace on Derek’s face for all of ten seconds before sighing.

“Please don’t kill me,” he begs, climbing over Derek’s thighs until he’s settled on the werewolf’s left side, away from his injured shoulder. Derek doesn’t say anything as Stiles wedges one leg behind him, nudging forward until Stiles is sitting at an angle between Derek and the side of his bed, supporting Derek’s left shoulder against his collarbone while still leaving the right free. “Seriously, please don’t.”

Derek doesn’t so much as make a sound, but he does sink back until the additional strain fades from his face, leaning heavily into Stiles. Now that he can see Derek’s back he can tell the gashes trail all the way down his ribs, like a clawed hand had grabbed over his shoulder and yanked him around while dragging down, and Stiles winces in sympathy pain.

“You’re all ridiculous,” Stiles mutters, talking to himself more than anything else, distracting himself from the low hisses of pain issuing from Derek’s mouth as he tries to clean the gashes as gently as possible. “Seriously, everything’s so stupidly aggressive and physical with you. I get that you’re all wolf instincts and all, but has nobody ever considered the idea of werewolf diplomacy? Set up a little business meeting, you and the Alpha Alpha, seconds if you absolutely insist.”

“That’s how proper packs work,” Derek breathes out, pushing the words through clenched teeth. “Pretty sure mine doesn’t count as a proper pack. Also, don’t have a second anymore.”

“Well, there’s always me in worst case scenarios,” Stiles teases, because the alternative is to think how small Derek sounded with that admittance, and he’d rather avoid that one like the plague.

“You’re Scott’s,” Derek argues.

“I’m no one’s,” Stiles disagrees. “I’m human, your loyalty rules don’t apply to me. I can favor whichever pack I want, whenever I want.”

“What makes you so sure?”
“The way Isaac’s divided loyalty had you all twisted up in knots but you haven’t even made a passing comment about mine.”

“Divided loyalty,” Derek snorts and shakes his head. The movement jars his shoulder infinitesimally, but it’s apparently enough for Derek’s fingers to close over the closest thing they can find and squeeze.

Stiles valiantly pretends not to notice Derek’s fingertips digging into his thigh.

“If you’d crawled into Scott’s window do you think he would have unquestioningly cleaned you up like this?” he challenges.

Derek’s silence speaks volumes.

Stiles lets the silence sit as he fits gauze squares over the claw marks, taping them as securely as he can manage without drifting into overkill territory. If Derek was human he would absolutely insist on going to the hospital for stitches, at least for the shoulder gashes, but Stiles knows better than to think Derek will even listen to the suggestion. He worms his way out from behind the werewolf instead, sparing a forlorn look at his definitely bloodstained sheets before straightening up and tossing the medical supplies he’d used back into the first aid box.

Derek hasn’t moved when Stiles comes back from the bathroom again, hands washed and kit back where it belongs. He’s slumped against the side of Stiles’ bed, semi-curled protectively in over himself as much as his injuries will allow, and Stiles is completely taken aback by how utterly exhausted the Alpha looks.

“If you’re going to sleep you might as well get on the mattress properly,” Stiles gripes, kicking lightly at Derek’s sneakered foot. “I’m getting a crick in my neck just from looking at you.”

“I’m not –”

“You really should,” Stiles insists. “You look like a kicked puppy. Seriously, it’s like you’re fresh off one of those god-awful Sarah McLachlan commercials, and I can’t even look at you. Besides, do you even have an actual bed somewhere? Like not a nest of blankets, but an actual bed with a mattress and a box spring and a roof over it?”

Derek musters a stronger glare than he’s managed yet tonight, and it’s still not even half as impressive as his usual, and that’s more than enough to strengthen Stiles’ resolve.

“Seriously,” he says, “Dad left twenty minutes before you got here for the night shift, and he won’t be back until tomorrow morning so there’s no chance he’ll accidentally walk in on you, and I’m supposed to pick Danny and Lydia up in half an hour, so I’ll be gone until at least like two. You’ll have the place to yourself, stop being stupid and just take the damn bed.”

Derek pulls himself up just enough to shift his weight onto the mattress, toeing off his sneakers as he drags himself most of the way onto the bed. Stiles watches him until he’s reasonably convinced Derek won’t put up any more protest on the matter before shuffling over to his closet and pulling out a shirt that doesn’t smell like sweat and Derek’s blood and hydrogen peroxide.

“You’re starting to smell like them,” Derek says quietly. Stiles glances up once he’s tugged the fresh shirt over his head, blinking expectantly until Derek elaborates. “Lydia and Danny.”
“That’s kind of weird,” Stiles points out. “Also, I’ve definitely showered since the last time I saw either of them.”

“Not like that,” Derek mutters. He’s watching Stiles pull his socks on, and Stiles can’t decide if it’s creepy or not. “If you spend enough time with someone your scents start to mingle – yours has always been more a combination of yours and Scott’s and your dad’s, since you spend almost all your time with them, even when you haven’t been around either of them in a while.”

“So like, Scott still smells like Allison, even though they’re not together anymore, because they spent so much time with each other when they were together?”

“Basically.”

“That’s still kind of weird,” Stiles nods decisively, shoving his feet into a pair of Chucks low-tops before sliding his phone and his wallet into his pockets, “but also kind of cool. You gonna be okay here? Painkillers probably don’t work on you, right?”

Derek shakes his head, and Stiles assumes it’s to the second question, not the first.

“Okay,” he shrugs. “Seriously though, don’t just humor me and leave the second I’m gone. You really look like you could use a couple hours of good sleep.”

“Get out of here, Stiles,” Derek grumbles, but it’s muffled by sleep and the weight of the pillow where it’s mashed against the side of his face.

“Sweet dreams, Sourwolf,” Stiles says back, rolling his eyes and glancing over his shoulder. There’s a smile tugging at the visible corner of Derek’s mouth, curving along his lips and disappearing into the shadow of his jaw, and Stiles can’t help staring.

It’s nothing like the sardonic smirk Derek occasionally pulls, not the seductive distraction Stiles has seen before. It’s small and soft, quietly unassuming and so painfully genuine, and Stiles feels his breath catch in his throat and hopes to God that Derek didn’t notice the way his heart might have skipped a beat.

Oh man. Stiles is so fucked.

---

_The wolf messed with your vision_  
_He is sitting in your kitchen while you sleep tonight_  
_He will eat your young, and you will act surprised_
“Stiles!” Lydia whines, and it’s all the warning she offers before dropping herself bodily into his lap. Small as she is it’s hardly much hassle, but her surprise appearance still startles an “oomph” out of him. He’d been curled in an Adirondack chair in a dark corner of Anderson’s backyard, nursing the single beer he was allowing himself and generally sulking.

This, of course, would have been like a beacon to Lydia.

“Stiles Stiles Stiles,” she coos, and Stiles wraps a bracing arm around her waist and leans forward to tug at her cup, bringing it to his mouth for an experimental sip. He hadn’t made it deep into the party, didn’t feel the need to push his way into the kitchen when the keg and most of the crowd were on the back deck, but Lydia had clearly found the good stuff, the hard stash of vodka and pineapple juice, heavy emphasis on the vodka.

There’s no reason to keep it from her, though; he personally witnessed her put away three quarters of a hamburger and a full plate of fries not three hours ago and she’s still mostly on her feet. She accepts the drink like she hadn’t noticed him taking it from her, taking a long sip before trying to settle back into him.

The dip of the chair makes him significantly lower than her, perched as she is on his knees, and that clearly isn’t satisfactory at all. Lydia shifts her weight until she’s firmly in the seat of his lap, butt nestling into the cradle of his hips, and they somehow wind up so Lydia’s shoulder is the perfect height for Stiles to rest his chin on.

“You’re sulking,” she accuses.

“Yeah,” Stiles agrees, because there’s no point in denying it, not to Lydia. She’s all-knowing, alcohol be damned; he wouldn’t be surprised if she even knew why.

“Me too,” she admits morosely, taking another sip. “You should have told me earlier, we could have pawned DD duty onto Harley for the night, she owes me one. We could have sulked together.”

“Misery always loves company, intoxicated or sober,” Stiles reminds her. They toast their drinks together, and Stiles feels momentarily overwhelmed with a wave of affection for this girl. It’s completely loving and completely platonic, the way he’s felt about Scott for most of his life, the way
he maybe was starting to feel about Allison, when he thought she wasn’t going anywhere, and oh
man does that seal the fucking deal on Stiles royal clusterfuck of a situation.

“What’s wrong, Lyds?” he coaxes gently, because at least some of the truth behind misery loving
company is that misery loves being distracted by a good old round of schadenfreude.

“Jackson called today,” Lydia mumbles, and that’s hardly news because Jackson, Stiles learned
recently, calls every day. Jackson and Lydia talk for hours every day, apparently, despite their
pointedly long-distance relationship, and the weakness of his disappointment at that revelation clearly
should have been a red flag sooner.

“Was he a dick?” Stiles prods, “because I will drive to wherever the hell he is and kick his ass, don’t
think I won’t.”

“Martha’s Vineyard,” she reminds him, because of course he was. “He told me…Stiles, he’s not
coming back.”

“Ever?” Stiles can’t help but ask, because that’s really the last thing he expected.

“Mr. Whittemore put in for a transfer to his firm’s office in Manhattan,” Lydia sniffs, and Stiles
tightens the arm he’s still got wrapped around her waist. “They enrolled Jackson in Choate, in
Connecticut. They think he got mixed up in something bad here, and he won’t tell them what
because honestly, werewolves, and their solution is to just keep him away from it all.”

“That’s…Lydia,” Stiles says softly, because he doesn’t know what to say. The sinking feeling in the
pit of his stomach is entirely sympathy for Lydia, because he has no basis for understanding what
that must feel like. It’s one thing to lose someone to death; there’s a clear-cut finality to it, a
permanent separation. Losing someone the way Lydia is, to know that Jackson is perfectly alive and
probably reasonably happy and entirely without her, that’s a whole different monster.

“He said we could still try.” she continues quietly, and he settles back to let her talk. She chases the
warmth of him, pressing further into his chest, and Stiles drops his beer on the ground in favor of
curling his other arm around her too. “Said we could keep doing the long distance thing, if I wanted
to.”

“Do you want to?” Stiles asks.

“N-no,” Lydia admits, shaking her head vehemently enough that three long curls land messily across
Stiles’ face. He lifts one hand and brushes them aside absently, keeps his hand in place and starts
stroking her hair when she leans back against him again. “He’s never coming back. Stiles. My love
life just went from Twilight to an asinine Taylor Swift song, and I’m genuinely not sure which is
worse.”

She’s definitely crying now, giving in to the press of tears Stiles had heard hovering the back of her
trembling voice, but she doesn’t let it stop her.

“There’s always college?” he suggests gently. “MIT’s in Boston, maybe Jackson’ll wind up liking
the East Coast so much that he’ll want to stay, maybe he’ll even wind up in Boston too.”

“That’s two years from now,” Lydia cries. “He’s going to one of the most prestigious boarding
schools in the country, where he’ll still be the gorgeous lacrosse star, but there’ll be dozens and
dozens of other smart, pretty girls just like me.”
“Lydia Martin,” Stiles says sternly, tugging gently on her hair until she tilts her head enough to meet his eye. “There’s nobody quite like you in the entire world, believe me. There’s not a single girl at that school who can hold a candle to you, I mean it.”

Lydia starts to shake her head again, and it’s the most insecure thing he’s ever seen from this gorgeous goddess of a girl, and he absolutely won’t have it.

“No, I’m serious,” he insists. “Because you’re not just beautiful and talented and brilliant, you’re also fierce and loyal and brave, and even if you weren’t, Lydia, you are the one thing Jackson loves enough in this world to break the vengeance hold the kanima had on him, and that means a hell of a lot. If he gives that up for some stupid fling with some stupid prep school girl then he’s an even bigger idiot than I ever thought, because that moron’s gone from a douchebag to a scaly oversized lizard to a freaking werewolf and you still love him, and he’ll never find another love like that ever again in his life.”

Lydia’s completely silent by the end of his outburst, and Stiles can’t help but feel like he did all those weeks and weeks ago, standing in his room and yelling at Lydia for being selfish in her recklessness. He opens his mouth to apologize, because he can’t believe they’re back there again, when Lydia reaches down and laces the fingers of her free hand through Stiles’.

“I love you,” she says quietly.

Stiles is fairly certain he can feel each and every one of his organs shattering like shards of glass, piercing through the soft flesh of his innards and burrowing between muscles and bones. He’s been waiting for what feels like most of his life to hear Lydia say those words to him, to hear soft warmth and affection and to have her fingers threaded through his and here he is. Lydia’s warm in his lap and pliant in his arms, and it feels like nothing.

No. Of course it doesn’t feel like nothing. It feels like a worn blanket from the arm of the couch during late night movie marathons, like hot chocolate with indulgent marshmallows on snow days, like fingers combing through your hair when you’re tired and half-asleep. It’s comfortable and warm and it feels like family, and that’s never how Stiles had imagined it, had wanted it, not from Lydia, and now that he has it it’s exactly everything he never realized he needed.

“I love you, too,” he murmurs back, tucking his chin back over her shoulder and curling protectively around her as she pulls deeper into herself and caves in to the tears.

He still feels it though, the snap and shatter of his organs and bones, the slow reformation as he settles into something new, something different. He’s spent most of his life wanting Lydia, so much so that it became a part of his identity, a part of the very make-up of Stiles Stilinski, and now that he has her, maybe not in the capacity he’d expected but definitely in the capacity he needs, now he has to figure out what to do with himself.

Danny finds them curled together and half-asleep as the party’s winding down, and from the morose understanding in Danny’s expression Stiles knows Lydia wasn’t the only one to get a phone call today. He doesn’t bother rousing Lydia, just lets Danny help get him upright while supporting both their weights and carries Lydia out to his Jeep.

“My house?” he asks, and Danny just nods, looking grateful. Stiles doesn’t remember until they’re
halfway there that he’d left Derek mostly asleep in his room, and he’s not sure what he’s hoping to find when he gets home.

If it was Derek in his bed, he’s disappointed. Lydia wakes up enough to walk herself inside the Stilinski’s house, and she makes her way straight into the kitchen for a glass of water and a hopeful quest for potato chips like Stiles knew she would. Danny heads for the bathroom, quiet on the first floor like they’re not sure if the Sheriff is home or not, and Stiles creeps upstairs.

His bedroom’s empty, bed primly made like it hasn’t been since the day he and his dad set it up (a month ago, as a belated birthday present, because all 5’11” of Stiles was really too much to fit on the tiny twin size bed he’d had since he’d outgrown his crib). The sheets are cool when Stiles experimentally slides one hand between them, and decidedly not the same ones Derek bled all over. His fingers catch when he slips back up towards his pillow and accidentally brushes under a post-it note. It’s gruff and simple and pretty classic Derek, even the thick block lettering spelling out a simple thanks., but Stiles is a sentimental fool and Derek has never thanked him before.

He tucks the note into a dark corner of the bookshelf behind his bed and makes a point of forgetting about it.

Stiles hisses down the stairs that the coast is clear, because even if the Sheriff isn’t home it feels too late, too heavy and quiet to use daytime volumes, and he changes into pajamas while he waits for Lydia and Danny to make their way up. Lydia comes bearing the half-eaten bag of Lays he knew she would find tucked away on the bottom shelf of the pantry, holding it out for him in exchange for the mesh gym shorts and t-shirt he’s pulled out for her.

He feels a renewed sense of gratitude towards his new queen-sized bed as he, Lydia, and Danny all climb comfortably on top of it, Lydia sandwiched between the two boys. Stiles focuses way too much energy on pretending that the pillow doesn’t smell like leather and smoke and wet leaves, and then on hoping that Lydia doesn’t notice.

“Do you think he’ll be okay in Connecticut?” she asks quietly, breaking the lull of silence they’d fallen into. “I mean, not as a person, but as a werewolf?”

Stiles had been wondering the same thing, honestly. He’d given Jackson’s absence a surprising amount of thought in recent weeks, wondering if he was surviving the transition from unaware kanima to entirely-too-aware werewolf, if he’d found a way to weather out the full moon on his own. The Whittemores, well-intentioned as they must have been, thinking they were pulling their son out of a bad situation, absolutely could not have picked a worse time to separate Jackson from his Alpha.

“That’s actually a really good question,” Stiles admits, “and we should probably talk to Derek about it. I was going to go there tomorrow, update him on Jackson’s situation, I can ask if you want?”

Lydia hums an agreement.

“Do you think he would have stayed with Derek?” he asks her. “As his Alpha? Derek did sire him, I guess, but he also tried to kill him.”

“I think he would have stayed with Derek,” Danny answers. “If he’d asked me my opinion I would have said Derek over any alternative. I think it would have been good for him, to have a pack that he felt like he belonged in.”

“Derek tried to kill Jackson because he didn’t think there was a way to save him,” Lydia adds. “Scott
didn’t get it, because all he was seeing was Derek trying to kill a kid, but Derek was trying to spare him, in the only way he knew how. Jackson might be a dick, we know that better than anyone, but if he knew he was being used to kill people like that…” Lydia shudders, and Stiles feels it all down his side where Lydia is pressed against him. “If Jackson thought he was going to spend the rest of his life in danger of being used for revenge killing, he would have rather been dead. Derek would have been doing him a favor.”

Stiles mulls that over. They’re right, suggesting that Scott would never have understood that.

“There has to be some way to merge Derek and Scott into one cohesive personality,” he sighs, more to himself than anything else. “Together they’d make the perfect Alpha.”

“Or you,” Lydia suggests, and she’s half asleep again, nodding off against Danny, who’s completely down for the count. “You’re kind of the perfect marriage of Derek and Scott. Lets make you Alpha.”

“I’ll be the Alpha of the human pack,” Stiles agrees, not bothering to hide his sharp grin in the darkness. “Population: you, me, Danny.”

“Grr,” Lydia mumbles, raising one hand in a weak imitation of Gaga Monster Paws before dropping her hand back down to curl around Stiles’ wrist. Stiles stifles a giggle against her shoulder, tugs the blanket up to his chin, and let himself fall asleep wrapped in the combined scents of the deep woods in the fall and Lydia’s apple bodywash.

He wakes up what feels like minutes later, though the weak sunlight pushing through the cracks between his blinds suggests otherwise. His dad is standing in the doorway, still in his uniform, eyebrows raised at the three teens piled into Stiles’ bed like he’s not sure if he should be scolding Stiles or celebrating his son’s return to teenage normalcy.

Stiles slips carefully from under the covers and ushers his dad out into the hallway, closing the door quietly behind them.

“They found out yesterday that Jackson’s not coming home,” he stage whispers, frowning sympathetically like it’ll earn him some brownie points.

The Sheriff takes the bait. “They can’t be too happy about that,” he muses, glancing over Stiles’ shoulder as though he can see through the door and personally gauge the other two teens’ emotional stability.

“They’re not,” Stiles shrugs. “No one really is. Jackson’s a pain in the ass, but he’s still a pretty central figure in most our day to day lives, you know?”

His dad gives him a long, appraising look, and Stiles does his best not to squirm under it.

“Got an interesting phone call from Mr. Whittemore the other day,” the Sheriff tells him slowly. “Said Jackson finally admitted he had a bigger part in the whole kidnap debacle than he’d originally suggested. Claimed it was his idea, really, a challenge to you and Scott in an ongoing prank battle, you steal a cop car or suffer mass public humiliation at Jackson’s hands, and you two locking him in the van was your stupid attempt at one-upping him, to which he retaliated with the restraining order. Mr. Whittemore was apoplectic, obviously, but it’s not the first time Jackson’s switched stories on me…” he trails off with a shrug, and Stiles exhales a breath he feels like he’s been holding for months.
“Everything just got so out of hand,” Stiles sighs, scrubbing one hand down his forehead and over the bridge of his nose. “One day, Dad, I swear I’ll tell you everything. Everything. When’s it safe, I promise I will.”

“Are you in danger?” the Sheriff pushes, latching onto the word ‘safe’ like Stiles knew he would.

“No – not any more so than usual,” Stiles admits. “But I’m okay, I really am. Right now it’s just…it’s Lydia, Dad…” he trails off suggestively, blinking puppy dog eyes at his dad, and he is the Worst Son Ever, because he’s officially just graduated from lying to cover up werewolves to lying just to escape an awkward chat.

Good one, Stilinski, A+ Humanity.

The worst part is it totally works; the Sheriff gives him one last long, searching look before nodding. They hug, because there’s always a hug, of course there’s a hug, and Stiles tries not to squirm around too much before he’s safely back behind the closed door of his room.

The noise seems to have woken Danny and Lydia though, the pair of them blinking blearily at him, and from there it seems like the day has begun, early crack of dawn time or not. They make their way to the diner, Lydia still in Stiles’ borrowed clothes, Stiles barely passing for acceptable outside attire in baggy cargos and one of his dad’s old Police Academy tees with a hole in the collar, and Danny stumbles up his front walk looking like he has every intention of climbing back into bed whether he actually falls back asleep or not.

“Are you still going to see Derek?” Lydia asks him, and she sounds more solid than she did last night but still a little small, a little softer than he’d like. Stiles nods.

“Among other things, yeah,” he says, because today is a day for errand running. Haircut and grocery shopping and returning three week overdue books to the library, anything that can maybe provide a healthy distraction from last night’s overwhelming epiphanies.

“Do you want some company, maybe?” she hedges tentatively, and Lydia may be a stone cold ice bitch 60% percent of the time, but her capacity to channel an absolutely adorable kitten explains why she has so many people, Stiles shamelessly included, wrapped around her perfectly manicured finger.

They stop by her house long enough for her to shower quickly, piling her wet hair under a UCLA baseball cap and tossing on denim shorts and an oversized t-shirt that looks about as worn and old as Stiles’. He’s perfectly content with today being a day for bumming it, God only knows he is, and they make a point of ignoring the raised eyebrows they both get as he leads her into the barbershop he’s been going to since forever.

“Stiles,” George calls, jumping out of the black chair he’d been lounging in and beckoning Stiles into it. “Thought you’d be in soon. The usual?”

The usual, a straight buzz cut, takes about a grand total of ten minutes and George spends the vast majority of it giving Lydia significant looks and making proud-grandfather faces at Stiles in the mirror. Lydia’s alarmingly good natured about it, charming and sweet as she settles herself into the vacant chair next to Stiles and prods George for stories about Stiles as a kid. He happily tells her about how Stiles, hyperactive since months before he even came out of the womb, his mother used to say, always had a bit of a problem sitting still for haircuts when he was a kid.

“Kept his hair pretty long for a kid,” George told Lydia, “because his mother was a smart one, she
was. But still, every few months or so we’d have to wrestle Stiles into the airplane seat back there,” he nods over his head, pointing out the child-size barber stool in the shape of an airplane, complete with leg holes and a seat belt. “Even then, his Mom’d have to hold him down most of the time, and we were damn lucky if the thing came out even halfway decent.”

“I don’t know why I still come here,” Stiles gripes back teasingly, covering his eyes with one hand. “See if you get a tip now, old man.”

George always gets a tip, of course, because George cuts his hair for free every time. Has since the first time Stiles came in and asked for a buzz cut, sitting still as a statue and watching tufts of hair fall away while firmly blinking unshed tears from his eyes. It’s a longstanding argument between them, George insisting he doesn’t feel right charging a long-time customer for a cut he could realistically do himself at home, especially one that requires monthly visits, and Stiles stubbornly leaving the exact amount the cut should be in George’s tip drawer.

It plays out as expected, Lydia watching with entirely too much interest as Stiles and George bicker back and forth, interjecting when George tried to insist Stiles “use the money to take your gorgeous girl here out to lunch,” laughing when Stiles shoots back that he’s “already bought Lydia breakfast today, can’t go spoiling her.”

She waits until they’re back in the Jeep though, stifling giggles and helping Stiles brush away prickly little hairs that fell through the collar of the cape George had thrown over him, to pin him to the seat with an all-knowing look.

“You did used to keep your hair long when we were kids,” she says, and it sounds like an accusation. “Even when you were definitely old enough to keep still for a quick haircut, you didn’t start buzzing it until middle school.”

Lydia runs a hand over his freshly shorn head, dislodging a few more loose hairs, and Stiles stalls.

“You knew who I was in middle school?” he demands, and she rolls her eyes at him.

“Of course I did, moron, you were a hyper crazy lunatic and most likely my number one competition for valedictorian, provided you could shut up and concentrate on your tests long enough to finish them.”

“We were twelve,” he reminds her flatly. “Twelve, Lydia, what the hell were you doing thinking about valedictorian, I didn’t even know what that word was when I was twelve.”

“Yes you did,” she scoffs, because he’s a liar and they both know it. “Now stop deflecting.”

Stiles sighs, because he knows when he’s been defeated, and nods. “Yeah. My mom started chemo in the middle of seventh grade, and she was pretty bummed about her hair. She had…it was a lot like yours, actually, but this rich chocolate brown and shorter and less perfect curls, and she shaved it all off because she thought it would be easier to lose stubble than to lose all that long hair a little at a time.”

Lydia’s silent in the passenger seat, and even though Stiles is sure she knew this was coming it’s a different thing entirely to hear it out loud.

“I found her crying in the bathroom one morning, and after school I walked over to George’s and asked him for a buzz cut. Went home and told my mom that as long as she was still going through
chemo my hair would never be longer than hers, that I wouldn’t grow it out again until we could grow it out together.”

His breath catches on the last word and Lydia reaches across the gearshift, lacing their fingers together and squeezing his hand hard. He squeezed back, because the alternative is pulling over and sobbing into the steering wheel and that’s absolutely not even an option right now.

“Do you ever…have you ever gotten to talk about it? Really?” Lydia prods gently.

Stiles shrugs. “I’ve always had to see someone for my Adderall prescription, they wanted to up the visits to once a week when it happened, but it’s hard for a single dad to get off work to drive his son around, especially when he’s the sheriff.”

“But what about like, Scott? Or your Dad?”

“Nah,” Stiles shakes his head. “Scott and I…a lot goes unspoken, you know? He knows enough to know how I feel about it, we don’t really need to hash it out. And my dad…I don’t think my dad will ever get over it, really. She was the love of his life, and it’s been a few years but he’s still reeling like it’s fresh, and I don’t need to add to that.”

“Well that’s dumb,” Lydia says bluntly, and Stiles can’t hold back the short bark of laughter that explodes out of him. She says it so shamelessly, so matter of fact, and he can’t help but grin at her even now. “Seriously, you should talk about it. Talking’s important. Any time you feel like you need to, tell me. I mean it.”

And she does, and that’s baffling and brilliant, and Stiles wonders when it was, exactly, that Lydia Martin became the best thing that’s ever happened to him. He keeps the question to himself, because there’s no need to get overly emotional right now, not when he’s raw enough that almost anything could be pried out of him with a properly worded nudge.

She squeezes his hand again, like she knows anyway, and they drive the rest of the way to the Hale house in silence.

He’s shocked, actually, properly shocked, to pull up and find a full-on construction site, teams of men in tool belts and yellow hardhats swarming over the significantly sturdier-looking infrastructure of the house.

Derek’s standing on the edge looking for all the world like the human equivalent of a cat with his hackles raised, biceps bulging as he crosses his arm tightly over his chest, clearly doing absolutely nothing more than making everyone nervous. Stiles wants to laugh, wants to pet the center of his triskele tattoo until the tension bleeds from those taut shoulders, wants to sneak up behind him and tackle him to the ground and demand he ‘lighten up, sourwolf.’

And then he wants to brain himself on the nearby pile of cinderblocks, because attraction he could probably deal with but this? Goddammit, where the hell did this come from?

“Derek!” he calls, abandoning the Jeep a few yards behind the Camaro. It’s not really loud enough to be heard over the din of the on-going construction, but Derek’s a werewolf with supersonic hearing, and Stiles swears he sees the harsh line of Derek’s shoulders relax just a bit.

Lydia climbs out and seats herself firmly on the hood, clearly content to maintain her distance from
Derek hasn’t turned around, hasn’t acknowledged Stiles’ arrival other than the shift in his stance when Stiles’ yelled his name, but he’s got no illusions of sneaking up on the Alpha. He pulls to a stop a step or two behind Derek, propping himself up against the tree Derek’s apparently staked out as his prime vantage point, and waits.

“Stiles,” Derek says finally, dropping his arms and glancing back at the teen. “What are you doing here?”

“Updates,” he announces cheerfully. “Speaking of,” he flails dramatically at the house behind them, “update!?”

“Peter decided he wasn’t spending another night ‘in that death trap of disgust and disease, Derek, this is not an episode of Supernatural, we don’t need to live like fugitives.’” Derek parrots, and Stiles stamps down on the urge to giggle. “He said technically the house is his too, and therefore his right to do with it whatever he wanted, and the money too, I guess, and here we are.”

“Technically,” Stiles points out, “I’m pretty sure Peter was declared legally dead by the town two weeks after he went missing from Beacon Crossing, so I’m not sure he has rights to anything. Also I’m not sure if living under an assumed dead identity makes you a fugitive, but I think there might be laws about that.”

Derek’s lip quirks in a way that hints at a smile, and yup, there it goes. Seems like Stiles’ body is completely incapable of not having something to swoon over, and since Lydia’s apparently out of the equation now he seems to have just transferred the whole thing right on over to Derek and that goddamn smile.

“I’ll let you be the one to remind him of that,” Derek offers. “Besides, I guess…”

He turns back, looks up at the mostly reconstructed frame of the house, and Stiles knows he’s seeing it before the fire, seeing the house in its full glory. Stiles had never made it out this far into the woods as a kid, had never seen it in person, but police reports. Newspaper articles. What he’d seen of it had been beautiful, and maybe it wouldn’t be so bad to have it fixed up again.

“You’re not sleeping here, are you?” Stiles says suddenly. “You’re still at the train depot, right?”

Derek shrugs in an entirely too dismissive way. Stiles narrows his eyes, because that’s really just absolutely unacceptable, and Derek cuts him off with another hint of a smile.

“Peter rented a room at a motel in town for the duration of the construction and told me if I he finds out I’ve gone back to the train depot again he’ll take his claws to the Camaro,” he admits, and Stiles doesn’t bother trying to control his laughter this time. Derek looks like a sulky, well-scolded teenager, and for the first time since his resurrection Stiles wonders if Peter’s return might be a good thing. Oh, sure, he’s definitely got some hellfire planned, Stiles has no doubt about that, but maybe it won’t be quite the catastrophe he and Derek have been anticipating.

“I’m going to keep that in mind,” Stiles says gleefully. “Stick it in my back pocket, save it for later. Next time you threaten to rip my throat out with your teeth I’ll just dangle my keys near your precious paint job.”
Derek growls, but it’s low and light, none of his usual aggression pressed into it, and Stiles thinks this might be what a playful growl sounds like. He nudges his shoulder experimentally against Derek’s and all the Alpha does is look at him, one heavy eyebrow raised.

“I’m onto you,” he mutters, grinning, and Derek rolls his eyes.

“The car can be fixed,” Derek shoots back, “ripping your throat out is a lot more permanent.”

“Yeah, tell that to Peter,” Stiles argues. He spares a look back over his shoulder, checking on Lydia still perched on the hood of his Jeep, and recoils slightly at the cold, narrow-eyed glare she’s shooting directly their way. It takes him a long, surprised second to realize that her brown eyes are fixed on Derek, glaring at him like he’s personally threatened everything she loves, and other than the one time Derek tried to kill Lydia, which Stiles isn’t even sure she’s ever heard the whole story about, he can’t think of one good reason why.

“Your girlfriend’s trying to kill me with her eyes,” Derek complains, and apparently he’s aware of the death glare too. He’s probably got a built in radar for death glares, a beacon for kindred spirits who practice murdering souls in the mirror.

“I genuinely don’t know why,” Stiles mumbles back, frowning at Lydia. If she notices him looking at her she doesn’t react.

“Why’re you here?”

Derek sounds grumpy again, all trace of light humor gone from his dark features, and Stiles takes a second to mourn the loss.

“Updates,” he says again, this time less enthusiastically. “Specifically of the Jackson variety, hence Lydia.”

“Well?” Derek prompts, and Stiles rolls his eyes at the sudden impatience.

“Jackson’s gone for good. His parents are moving to New York and shipping him off to boarding school in Connecticut. I figure he’s technically an Omega right now, but I’ve been reliably informed that if he’d had any choice in the matter he would have stayed as your Beta, so I thought you might want to know. Also, Lydia was wondering if there’s anything he has to do, as a werewolf moving to a new territory, to avoid getting killed in some misguided turf war.”

“Manhattan’s a big city, territory rules are a lot more lax in cities,” Derek says slowly, running a hand through his hair as he parses through Stiles’ points. “If he’s going to boarding school he should be okay too, packs in the areas of colleges and boarding schools tend to have an open door policy, since most wolves in the areas are so transient. He should reach out to the local pack’s Alpha, as a nicety more than anything else, but as long as he keeps his head down and his teeth to himself he should be fine.”

Stiles nods. It’s a nice reminder that not all werewolves are aggressive dicks, he thinks maybe a few of the ones in this town could stand to have their memories jogged.

“Is he going to be okay?” he asks quietly. “As a pretty new werewolf all alone on the opposite side of the country from what should’ve been his pack?”

Derek turns to look at him, a long, searching look like he’s trying to assemble the mystery puzzle that
is Stiles without having any idea what the final product should look like. Stiles runs the question back through his head; he thinks maybe, if you listen to it the right way, it kind of sounds like he’s lumping himself in with that pack.

He might be.

“He’s made it through two full moons,” Derek points out finally. “That’s the hardest part, really.”

Stiles nods. He’s not sure when he started caring about Jackson’s welfare, sometime between the last time he suggested they kill him and feeling Lydia fall apart over Jackson’s move, and it’s a weird feeling. Derek knows it too, he’s looking at Stiles like he’s not sure what lead them here.

Stiles wonders that a lot lately, when it comes to Derek.

“Text me later,” Derek adds. “I’ll ask Peter if he remembers who the predominant pack in Connecticut is, see if we can get Jackson some contact information.” He pauses for a moment, like he’s not sure he wants to say whatever’s left on his mind, but Stiles waits. “Pack isn’t necessarily affected by distance,” he says finally, glancing over Stiles’ shoulder to where Lydia’s sitting. “If Jackson wants to be a member of this pack it doesn’t matter if he’s spending a year or two in Connecticut.”

“I’ll pass that on,” Stiles nods. “Yeah.”

Derek nods back like a dismissal, and Stiles takes the hint. He’s halfway back to his Jeep when he remembers one last thing, turning back to Derek and not bothering to raise his voice over the buzz of a chainsaw ten feet away.

“If the motel room starts feeling small, given your roommate and all, my window’s always open. Even when I’m not home, just keep an ear out for my dad and let yourself in.”

Derek makes no attempt to acknowledge him, but Stiles is satisfied the werewolf heard him anyway.

He lets himself back into the Jeep and waits for Lydia to buckle herself in before shifting gears and pulling the car away from the new construction zone that is the once and future Hale house. It’s just barely faded from the rearview mirror when he turns to Lydia, careful to keep his face void of judgment.

“You,” he accuses, “what’s your deal with Derek?”

“What?” Lydia says defensively. Too defensively. “Nothing. I don’t have a problem with Derek.”

“You are a lying liar who lies,” Stiles sing-songs at her. “I’ve seen you glaring great big daggers of death at him, what gives?”

“It’s silly,” she mumbles, fidgeting with the hem of her oversized shirt. “I just get overprotective sometimes.”

“Overprotective of who?” he laughs, because none of them need protecting from Derek, not as far as he knows.

“You, stupid,” she pouts. “He looks at you like…I don’t know, I just don’t like it.”
“Aw, Lyds,” Stiles teases, poking lightly at her. She swats his hand away, and there’s no doubt in his mind that if she could be, she’d be growling. “Seriously, he’s not that bad. We’re almost even…well, not friends, but we’ve reached an understanding.”

“That’s what I don’t like,” Lydia grumbles. No amount of prodding will get her to elaborate on that though, so Stiles chalks it up to Lydia being Lydia and gives up before they even clear the woods.

After he wakes up panting from his third dream about Derek shoving him against a wall/mattress/the Camaro, Stiles finally caves and does some research. He’s thorough, because he’s a nerd at heart, surfing everything from legitimate LGBT-friendly websites to trashy redtube porn to the incredibly detailed PWP archives on AO3 (incredibly detailed. Jesus Christ, half these authors are underage girls, and yet some of those stories might as well be step by step How to Gay Sex guides, diagrams provided by patented Stilinski overactive imaginations).

And, because Thoroughness, thy bitch is Stiles, he talks to Danny.

It’s one of those nights where there’s actually nothing going on, but Lydia wanted to see the Katy Perry movie, and Stiles’ newfound reassessment of his feelings for her didn’t make him any less whipped, and Danny genuinely had nothing better to do (read: was waiting for an excuse to see it anyway), so they were movie-bound. Danny offered him a ride, Stiles saw the opportunity, and there they were.

Doesn’t mean it’s an easy conversation to start – Stiles has been spinning his phone between his fingers, smearing smudges across the screen and almost dropping it twice, for ten minutes when Danny finally reaches over and slaps his palm flat over Stiles’ hands.

“Just spit it out,” he orders, and Stiles resists the urge to point out that that’s totally what he said, because that joke is both outdated and overplayed.

“We’re friends, right?” he asks carefully, and even though it’s mostly his way of stalling it’s still kind of a fair question.

“Of course we are, idiot, unless you’re going to ask me again if you’re attractive to gay guys.”

“It’s possible,” Stiles says cagily, “that maybe I’m less worried about the entire universe of gay guys in general and have narrowed my focus specifically to one not-so-gay-at-all guy?”

Danny is quiet for a few seconds, but Stiles gets the distinct impression that it’s more his attempt at being properly respectful of Stiles’ revelation than him actually being surprised by the confession.

“To be fair, Derek pays a suspicious amount of attention to his hair. Metrosexuality and manscaping are all well and good, and stereotyping is bad, but I wouldn’t rule him out entirely…”

Stiles is pretty sure he chokes on nothing but thin air.

“Who said anything,” he whines, and it’s in such a desperate, panic-driven falsetto that he’s certain he just confirmed every last one of Danny’s suspicions, “about Derek?”

“I’ve seen the way you turn into flailing, spazzy nerdball around someone you like,” Danny reminds him, smirking knowingly over from the driver’s seat. “So I know it’s not anyone we hang out with
regularly. Plus, I’ve watched half a dozen guys and girls hit on you on any given night without you even noticing, and some of them have been Lydia-quality attractive, which means whoever’s caught your eye has to be model-worthy.”

Stiles lets himself panic for a few more minutes, tells himself that Danny has always been uncanny in his observational skills, and that Derek, for all his built in supernatural emotion-detectors, is overwhelmingly obtuse about people. Danny spends plenty of time with Stiles these days, his logic’s sound, and that totally doesn’t mean that anyone else knows.

“This one time,” he finally says tentatively, glancing over at Danny’s carefully neutral expression, “I found a CVS receipt in his car for thirty bucks worth of Garnier Fructis and seriously almost died from laughing so hard. It’s just really hard to take threatening growling seriously when you’re picturing Derek carrying a little red basket and debating between Extra Strong and Ultra Strong.”

Danny finally grins, wide and open and honest, and Stiles can’t help but grin back, laughing quietly and shaking his head. Okay, so that went maybe better than expected. Not that he had any fears about Danny, really, but still. Everything feels a little looser now that he’s told someone – not completely gone, but less. Maybe like unbuckling your belt after a particularly enthusiastic effort at eating an entire Thanksgiving turkey on your own. The stomachache’s still there, and so’s the inevitable tryptophan crash, but the edge is softer.

“Anything in particular you wanted to know?” Danny asks, pausing just a beat too long at the stop sign before Lydia’s house.

“Nah, I know how to use Google,” Stiles shrugs. “Just wanted to tell someone.”

“Well,” Danny offers, pulling into Lydia’s driveway, “if you want to tell someone when you finally get into those super tight jeans of his, I’m all ears. Every delicious, scandalous inch of detail.”

Lydia lets herself into the backseat and wisely doesn’t ask why Stiles is systematically pelting Danny with the entire contents of the Prius’s center console.

Stiles opens his bedroom door and finds Derek on his laptop.

He thinks he takes it in stride, really: flails silently, throws his keys at Derek’s head (misses), and slams the door.

“Admittedly, I literally invited this on myself, but couldn’t you at least leave the door open or something, text a warning, wave a white flag out the window?”

“Sure,” Derek promises, still with his back to Stiles, “because your dad definitely won’t notice any of that.”

“Five second TXT, Derek, it literally only has to be eight characters. I-n-u-r-r-o-o-m,” Stiles whines. He takes advantage of Derek’s apparent determination to ignore him, shucking his shorts and replacing them with loose sweats.

“Phone’s dead,” Derek grunts, “bullet through the screen.”

Stiles crosses the room so fast he surprises even himself.
“Why was someone shooting bullets at you?” he cries, grabbing Derek’s shoulder and yanking the chair around. Derek looks whole, un-bloody, and entirely unimpressed with the interruption.

“It’s possible someone got the impression that I’m a dangerous and potentially violent animal,” he tells Stiles drily, pulling the expression Stiles privately (when he’s panicking less) refers to as his grumpycat face.

“When, where, who was it, why, do we need wolfsbane, shit it wouldn’t heal with the bullet still in you, right?” Stiles’ hands are skimming the air a quarter inch above Derek’s arms as though he expects to feel bullet holes he can’t see. They’re hovering over the hem of his short sleeves when Derek’s face softens, one hand coming up to cuff Stiles’ wrist gently.

“Stiles, I’m fine,” he says carefully. “I really meant animal. In the woods, it was kind of dark. I think I scared some guys with a bb gun. Besides,” he adds wryly, “you’re looking in the wrong place, considering my phone was in my pocket.”

Stiles, who’s been staring at the place where Derek’s thumb is still pressing lightly into his wrist, the little hollow between bone and tendon where his pulse is strongest, flashes his eyes down towards Derek’s lap. Front pocket or back pocket? Thigh, or…

Stiles flushes red and rears back hard enough to break Derek’s loose grip. He busies himself with swooping down to pick up the shorts he’d abandoned on the floor, waits to speak until he’s got his back firmly to Derek and his hands focused on folding the shorts into perfectly overlapping halves.

“Tell me you got shot in the ass,” he laughs shakily, prays Derek buys the flimsy bravado in his voice.

“Stiles, look at me,” Derek demands softly, and he waits until Stiles (shoving the painstakingly folded shorts haphazardly into a drawer and undoing a solid minute of fussy work) actually looks over. “I’m fine.”

He doesn’t say anything, kicks the drawer shut and pretends the uneven drawstrings on his sweatpants are a travesty of utmost importance.

“Whatever, Hale,” he scoffs, eyes on his knees, “you’re just trying to distract me from the fact that a couple kids shot you in the ass.”

Stiles ignores the weight of Derek’s eyes on him, meticulously tugs on the shorter string and studiously avoids looking up until he hears the telltale squeal of the desk chair pivoting back around. Even then he lowers himself slowly onto his bed, hauls up the stack of books he’s been meaning to reshelve for a few weeks, and stares resolutely at the spine of The Maze Runner.

“You know, the point of password protecting a computer is so that your average Joe Werewolf can’t break into your room and help himself to it,” he says finally, once he’s sure he can open his mouth without giving anything away.

“I actually tried Lydia, before anything else,” Derek admits, back to browsing what looks suspiciously like the Cyanide and Happiness homepage. “Speaking of, did Scott change his password now that they broke up?”

“Yes,” Stiles lies, shoves Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close into place with a little too much
force. “How many tries did it take?”

“Lydia, then your mom’s name, then your birthday. It took two tries with ‘derek is a sourwolf,’ though, I wasn’t sure if sourwolf was one or two words.”

“I thought maybe it would be the lack of capitalization,” Stiles shoots back. He’s not even a little bit embarrassed; he’d known it was only a matter of time before Derek helped himself to his laptop, that was the whole point of the password.

“You have an ee Cummings anthology in that pile,” Derek points out, nodding his head backwards towards the pile in Stiles’ lap. “That, and your texts are always entirely lower case.”

“That’s sheer laziness,” because it is, “you’re lucky you even get fully actualized words, Scott gets straight textspeak.”

“Which is appalling. It’s not even shorthand, it’s just the brutalization of the English language.”

“Okay Hipster McEnglish Major, calm down,” Stiles teases. “Besides, you can’t really think Scott could read shorthand.”

“I don’t think you can either,” Derek challenges, and Stiles huffs out a laugh in response.

“I memorized the entire lexicon of Beacon Hills Police Department’s signal codes, standard military call signs, and Morse code when I was thirteen, what makes you think I can’t read shorthand.”

Stiles takes a pathetic amount of satisfaction in the ringing silence from Derek’s side of the room, until he glances over just long enough to notice two fingers tapping lightly against the surface of his desk.

“Now you’re just insulting my intelligence,” he complains when Derek’s finished, because tapping out Stiles is a shameless liar takes a stupidly long time and he’s more than happy to let Derek suffer through the whole thing. “And you can clearly tell I’m not lying, you filthy cheater.”

Derek doesn’t look even slightly perturbed to be called out on it.

“You should have told me sooner,” he does say, though, because even when Stiles is right Derek still has to be slightly more right. “Morse code is handy when you want to communicate with someone with extraordinary hearing.”

“Sign language,” Stiles muses in response. “We should learn that. That could be even handier, pun completely intended. Or do you know it already?”

Derek glances over his shoulder long enough to make sure Stiles is watching before he raises his hand, fingers shifting rapidly – a fist, his pointer finger crossed over his thumb, pinky raised, pointer and thumb extended perpendicular, a looser fist with his fingertips against his thumb, another fist. It’s faster and smoother than anything Stiles had ever managed with his clumsy fumbling, but he remembers enough of the basics to recognize his own name being spelled out.

“Just the alphabet,” Derek admits, “something faster could be better.”

“Baseball signals,” Stiles suggests, because Moneyball is the next book on the pile and if that’s not a sign from the universe then what is. “Finger gun for hunters, Stilinski-esque arm flailing for ‘run like
hell,’ helpless writhing on the floor for wolfsbane.”

“You do all of those already anyway, complete with incredibly loud verbal commentary in case we missed the memo,” Derek points out, and maybe it’s a little rude but it’s not entirely inaccurate. “Besides, baseball signals are supposed to be a lot less obvious.”

“What’dya know anyway,” Stiles scoffs.

“Other than nine years of little league? Two seasons as the starting pitcher for the varsity baseball team probably didn’t hurt.”

Derek has the audacity to turn around and shoot Stiles a cheeky smirk that does horrible things to both Stiles’ ability to breathe properly and his will to live.

“Oooh,” he mocks, “I’m so impressed the werewolf has athletic skills. Did you ever accidentally forget you weren’t playing fetch and try to catch the ball with your teeth?”

“Only once, and I bit it clean in half,” Derek says solemnly. Stiles will never admit it takes him a few too many long, drawn out seconds to catch sight of the telltale lilt at the edge of Derek’s lips, but he will happily own up to the surprised bark of laughter that escapes when he realizes Derek is totally joking.

“Werewolf’s got jokes,” he laughs, and that small hint of a smile looks a little stronger when Stiles shrugs his shoulders and shakes his head in defeat. “Come on, though, there has to be some little canine tendency. Inherent dislike of cats? Uncontrollable urge to growl at mailmen? Inexplicable tendency towards kibble over cereal?”

“Well,” Derek drawls slowly, and he’s still twisted around enough that he can pin Stiles with a look Stiles feels straight down to his toes, “I do love a good chase.”

“What, not the kill?” he tries, and if his voice is a little shaky no one ever has to know.

“Oh, there’s definitely fun there too,” agrees Derek, and there’s still something else in his stare. “But the anticipation…”

And Stiles would swear, swear up down left right and with one hand over his heart on the soul of his beloved Jeep, that they’re not just talking about a playful romp through the woods. That something is still lighting the grey green highlights of Derek’s eyes, and there’s the faintest hint of a dimple on the side where one corner of Derek’s mouth is still upturned, and the overall effect is going to get Stiles in capital T-R-O-U TROUBLE.

His phone’s on vibrate, and for a text it only buzzes once, barely even enough for Stiles to feel where he dropped it against his ankle, but goddamn werewolves and their goddamn supersonic hearing, because Derek jerks like he’s been pinched. Just like that whatever odd tension had been leaking into the air between them is poof, gone.

He waits until Derek turns the chair back to face his desk, closing out of what was definitely Cyanide and Happiness to the even more baffling screen of the collective search results of mens henley on the J.Crew website (J.Crew, Derek? REALLY???), before quietly reaching for his phone and sliding open the text.

impromptu beach road trip tomorrow, harley and co going too, I'll drive us and danny if you supply
the food, say yes

Of course Stiles says yes, because the beach is approximately his favorite place in all of California and he hasn’t been there yet this summer.

try to actually sleep tonight, I’m picking you up at six and will blast nothing but Madonna at top volume if you even think about falling asleep in the car

bring me coffee and then we’ll all be happy

danny’s on breakfast duty, you can place your order with him

Stiles is halfway through a simultaneously demanding and pleading text to Danny when Derek clears his throat, a low rumble that’s not unlike his preferred growl.

“I can leave,” he says hesitatingly when Stiles glances up in surprise. “I mean, I know you’re dad’s on duty all night…” he trails off and gestures at Stiles’ phone, like that’s supposed to mean something.

“So?” Stiles frowns, because he’s never been faced with this oddly awkward-looking Derek before, and he’s not quite sure why his dad’s presence is in any way related to his texting habits. “No one’s kicking you out, it’s just Lydia conspiring to drag my ass out of bed at the crack of dawn.”

Derek still looks extra super shady, and maybe a little bit like he’s just stubbed his toe or sucked on a lemon, something wincing and sour in the creases around his eyes, and Stiles has absolutely no idea.

“Look, I’m serious,” he insists, shoving the last book (The Lightning Thief, and he feels absolutely no shame about it because awesome books are awesome no matter how old you are) onto his shelf.

“I’m gonna go brush my teeth and whatever, but I mean it, you should stay. You obviously came here for a reason, and I totally invited you to. My bed’s big enough for two people, or there’s extra pillows and blankets in the hall closet if you’d rather the floor, or even if you just want to keep up your little online shopping expedition, no silly little laptop glow is going to wake me up once I’m out.”

Whatever’s slid under Derek’s skin doesn’t seem to have been soothed by Stiles’ little speech, but he nods once and slinks slowly back around to consider a slate gray henley that Stiles is 85% positive Derek already has three of, so he’s confident enough that if he leaves the room Derek will still be there when he gets back.

The computer screen might not be enough to keep him up, but Stiles is still wide awake with the knowledge that Derek is in his room when the white-blue glow cuts off an hour later, plunging them into darkness. He resolutely keeps his back to Derek, even though he’s pretty sure the werewolf can tell from his heart rate or his breathing or his what-the-hell-ever that Stiles isn’t really asleep. Let him make up his own mind about whether or not he wants to stay.

Stiles feels the side of the bed dip the same moment he feels the comforter shifting against his bare flank, hides his small smile against the arm he’s resting his head on. Derek’s all broad-shouldered and big-armed, but his body tapers down enough at the waist that there’s whole valleys of space between his hips and Stiles’, and Stiles tries desperately to pretend that he’s not hyperaware of last inch of distance between them.

He cracks his eyes open just long enough to catalogue the subtle changes since he fell asleep still
staring down the wall and pretending to ignore the heat of Derek’s right shoulder a mere eight inches from his back. Stiles had rolled over at some point, hips and belly and chest facing Derek, shoulders twisted down nearly flat against the mattress, forehead inches from the arm Derek had shoved under his pillow and nose nearly pressed into Derek’s side. It’s slow burn heat, like sitting by a fire, and it washes over him in waves, and if he curls his wrist enough that the back of his hand brushes against Derek’s ribs, no one ever has to know…

The next time Stiles opens his eyes his alarm is going off, 5:30 and hell, and when he stretches an arm across to where he keeps his phone he realizes he’s alone.

There’s a mug sitting on his desk, though, and two minutes later when Stiles finally drags himself over to it it’s full to the brim of coffee, black, that’s still too hot to drink.

Considering everyone else’s blatant disregard for things like territory, personal space, and locks, Stiles is kind of surprised when Scott bangs down the kitchen door like he wasn’t capable of letting himself in. It’s early, too early, that hazy half an hour before dawn when everything’s the same flat murky gray, so Stiles will allow for the possibility that Scott forgot his key. And his built-in lock-picking skills. And wall-scaling, window-crawling abilities.

“Why are you at my house,” Stiles mumbles, one long string of syllables stumbling out of his mouth one on top of another. Scott doesn’t answer, probably because Stiles doesn’t quite possess the ability to hear through doors, so he shuffles blearily over and flips the deadbolt.

“Get in get in,” Scott orders, shoving Stiles backwards and throwing himself over the threshold, slamming the door shut behind him. It wakes Stiles up faster and harder than a straight shot of caffeine, though his self preservation appears to still be in bed as he elbows Scott aside and presses his nose against the glass.

“What?” he hisses, “what is it, what’s going on?”

And then he sees it. Laid out on the picnic table at the edge of the patio, neatly arranged with the arms folded serenely at the wrists and ankles pressed together through neat dress slacks, the carefully displayed body of Gerard Argent.

In pieces. Three of them.

“What?” Stiles whines, reaching behind him to slap uselessly at Scott’s shoulder. “Holy shit holy shit holy shit shit Scott what the fuck is that doing here?”

“I don’t know,” Scott whispers back, high and distressed and pointedly not looking. “I thought I smelled him – it – something – by my house and I was following the scent and it looked like it was leading here but I didn’t think it would actually be here here.”

“Oh my god, is that a bow around his chest?”

It is. A gift bow, big and red and prissily tied right over his ribs, and Stiles knows exactly how it got here and oh my god he’s going to vomit and then he’s going to curl up in a ball and die.

He’s pawing numbly at the pocket of the hoody he grabbed after Scott’s text, yanking out his cell phone after three failed attempts at finding the opening and dialing the number before Scott can even
begin to protest.

“Derek,” he hisses the moment the call connects, not even bothering to wait for whatever disgruntled greeting Derek had planned for him. “You need to get to my house now. Be as sneaky as possible, but try to avoid the backyard.”

“What.”

“Yes, I appreciate it’s 5:00am and even you need your beauty sleep, but Gerard Argent’s dismembered body is in my backyard so can you please come over now.” Stiles feels approximately no shame at the high pitched shrill his voice has reached by the end there – what matters is he can tell in an instant it’s effective.

“Stay in the house,” Derek orders. “Keep the doors locked until I get there. Are you alone?”

“Scott’s here,” Stiles admits, and Scott looks kind of pissed but he can deal. “He was tracking the scent and it lead him here. Derek, I think it’s –”

“I know,” Derek cuts him off. There’s an overwhelming amount of rustling that blocks out his voice for a split second, followed so quickly by the slam of a car door that he wonders if Derek hadn’t been sleeping in the Camaro. “I’m on my way.”

The call ends with the rev of an engine, like Stiles might not have really believed him, and Stiles can’t help but roll his eyes as he shoves the phone back into his pocket.

“What,” he sighs, finally caving to the cranky glare Scott’s been leveling him with since the second he hit send.

“Why’d you call Derek?” Scott snaps, low and layered with a soft growl Stiles hasn’t heard from Scott in a while. It’s territorial and possessive, and almost exclusively reserved for threats against Allison.

“There’s a dead body in my backyard,” Stiles reminds him. “A dead body killed by wolfsbane poisoning after a bite you forced Derek to give. Making you one half of the parties responsible for the dead part of the label dead body. I just thought the other half might like to be present while we decided what to do with it.”

Stiles knows it’s a lie the second the words are out of his mouth, and from the tight-lipped, narrow-eyed stare Scott gives him it’s a pretty obvious one.

“You know when we were little and they used to make us play word association games?” Stiles tries again, after a few long minutes of suffering pointed and accusatory silence. “You know, like fire truck, red, sleep, pillow, that kind of thing.”

“Stiles, freak,” Scott shoots back, and Stiles rolls his eyes.

“Scott, moron. Anyway. I think maybe somewhere along the way I developed a bit of a…danger, Derek trigger.”

“Yeah, danger, probably caused by so you should stay away from Derek,” Scott mutters hotly.

Stiles shakes his head. “Naw, man, more like oh shit Stiles you’re in danger, call Derek cause he’s
got fangs and claws and an excellent track record for saving your life.”

Scott looks like Stiles has just insulted both Allison and his mother all in one shot, and Stiles can’t help but roll his eyes again because seriously, this is even worse than the time Scott got cranky about Stiles hanging out with Lydia and Danny.

“Dude, he literally crawled over broken glass to lead Peter in the opposite direction from my pathetic ass, and we weren’t even friends yet.”

“And you’re friends now?”

Stiles freezes, because there’s no good way to answer that. He thinks maybe they are, actually – not like Lydia or Danny or, obviously, Scott, but still something. Maybe. To admit that to Scott though, when he’s already starting to look a little hairy around the edges, would be a lot. And to lie, after already getting caught in one Derek-related lie this morning…

“Look,” he sighs, “Derek’s an ass, and a dick, and an idiot, and kind of a lousy Alpha. But he’s also kind of great, in his own weird way, and even before that I kind of trust him with my life.”

The buzz of an incoming text stops Scott from answering, though really the thunderous expression on his face is more than enough, and Stiles thanks God and also Jesus for small favors as he fishes his phone back out of his pocket.

outside, window next to the tv

Stiles forcibly shoves aside the immediate realization that Derek definitely just heard what he said to Scott, if he’s standing just outside the house, focusing instead on scuttling into the living room and shoving the window in question as wide open as it’ll go.

“I’m genuinely concerned that you know my house this well,” Stiles hisses as Derek shimmies through the tight space, rolling into a crouch under the sill before straightening up and sliding the window back into place. “Also, did you fly here, because my dad being the Sheriff will not save you from massive speeding tickets.”

“It gets really boring here, when you’re at school and your dad’s working,” Derek grumbles back. He sounds kind of defensive about it, like it’s totally normal to memorize the layout of houses you regularly lay low in.

“Whatever, creep,” Stiles mutters. He purposefully knocks their shoulders together as they squeeze through the kitchen doorway, smirking as Derek snaps his teeth at him, and Scott blinks at them like he’s quite sure they were possessed by demons in the short time Stiles was gone from the room.

“There’s a salt perimeter around the whole property,” Stiles tells him, because even though it’s a lie and he knows Scott won’t get it, someone has to say something to snap the staring contest Scott and Derek have engaged in.

“You’re not exactly Dean Winchester,” Derek mutters, and Stiles can’t decide if he’s more surprised that Derek called him out on the reference or that, for the first time in Stiles’ memory, Derek conceded the staring contest first.

“No, but I’d love to see you and Castiel sit down for coffee,” he muses.
“Do alternate realities exist?” Scott grumbles. “What’s the possibility that I’ve woken up in a reality that isn’t mine? Or that this is a dream?”

“Do you dream about me and Derek often, then?” Stiles says cheekily. His attention’s mostly on Derek, crossing the kitchen to peer out the back door, but he can still see the way Scott’s face runs through a variety of both vivid expressions and fascinating colors.

“Did you get a good look at this?” Derek interrupts, glancing over his shoulder at them. “Either of you?”

“ Mostly what you can see,” Stiles shrugs. “It’s been cut at the neck and the waist, someone’s clearly cleaned him up and he’s definitely in different clothes than we last saw him in –”

“You remember what he was wearing?”

“He kidnapped and beat the shit out of me, Scott, I kind of an unusually vivid memory of that particular evening.”

Derek’s growl brings Stiles sharply back to the conversation, shaking his head once and cracking his neck before continuing. “The gift wrap, obvious and freaky, and if you look you can see his right forearm is bared.”

“Meaning what?” Derek presses.

“Bared and healed. No sign of your bite on it. Which means he was alive after he left the warehouse for at least long enough for that to happen.”

Derek nods once, like Stiles is a student he’s proud to have gotten the right answer from, and turns back towards them.

“Why is he here,” Scott snaps, eyes on the window over the kitchen sink. Stiles thinks he’s tempted to double-check the observations but would rather admit ignorance than suffer sharing the same window space as Derek. “Who brought him here, and why?”

“Stiles?” Derek asks, and Stiles knows it’s a power play. Derek already knows the answer, is asking Stiles both as a test to see what Stiles will say and as a test to see how Scott will handle the easiness between them.

“The Alphas,” he guesses, rubbing one hand over his close-cropped hair and frowning at Derek’s affirmative nod. “It’s a reward for good behavior, Derek heeded their warning, you and Isaac called off the search, and they’re rewarding us by tying up one of our loose ends.”

“Good,” Derek nods, and Stiles can’t help the pleased satisfaction that courses through him even if it means a sourpuss from Scott.

“Great, so they’re total power hungry creeps who like dangling their superior advantage over us,” Scott assesses. It’s crude, but not inaccurate, so Stiles doesn’t bother addressing it. “Why here though? Why Stiles’ house.”

Stiles has his own theory about that, too, but he’s not as ready to share that one. It’s slightly terrifying, for one thing, and kind of presumptuous for another. It’ll also no doubt lead to more questions from Scott, questions Stiles isn’t quite sure Derek will want him to answer.
“It’s another message,” Derek answers, eyes thoughtful as he studies Stiles’ neutral expression. “They’re letting us know they’re watching us, they know us. If they’d dropped it at my house it’d be a message to me, your house a message to you, but Stiles’…they know Stiles is between the two packs, that a message sent to him will be delivered loud and clear to both of us.”

There are times, on very rare occasions, that Stiles really, really hates being right.

“Stiles isn’t between the two packs,” Scott says hotly. “Stiles has a place in a pack.”

And oh, he’s even more than right. There were three messages being sent here. To Scott, a message to pay attention to the pack dynamics dividing them, to Stiles, a message that he’s on their radar just as much as any of the wolves are, and to Derek…

“They know you came here,” Stiles says quietly, turning his gaze on Derek.

Derek nods, because of course that’s the message they’re sending Derek. Derek, who’s spent the last six years of his life just trying to find somewhere safe and quiet to lay low and hide, is being warned that no where, not while the Alpha pack is still in Beacon Hills, is a safe hideout from them.

“You should swing by Allison’s,” he tells Scott suddenly.

“She’s not there,” Scott reminds him. “No one is. Why would they have gone there?”

“Because he’s Gerard Argent?” Stiles suggests, and for a very brief second Derek’s lips quirk at the obvious sass in his tone. He fights his own grin as he keeps his eyes on Scott. “Because they’ve gotten everything they could’ve from him, but there’s still two other Argents left here, even if they aren’t here right now. Didn’t you say she texted you the other day and said they’re coming back soon?”

“What about him?” Scott frowns, jerking his head in a way that makes it unclear if he’s referring to Derek or Gerard.

“Can we learn anything from the body that we don’t already know?” Stiles asks Derek, who frowns and shakes his head. “Then I’m going to, for once, do what a normal person would do if he found a dismembered body in his backyard – I’m going to call the Sheriff, pack a bag, and stay anywhere else in the world that isn’t the house a dead body was dropped off at.”

No one seems to have a legitimate argument against his plan, so cops it is. Scott, who Stiles knew would not be able to leave the Argent idea alone the second he suggested it, quietly slips out a side window as Stiles is making the 911 call.

Derek watches with something like morbid amusement on his face as Stiles adopts a heady kind of panic the second the dispatcher picks up the phone, rambling fitfully about oh my god Janine it’s Stiles there’s a dead body in my backyard I’m not kidding Janine I came downstairs to make coffee and there is a body on the back patio can you please send my dad like now right now.

“Is she new?” Derek asks the minute Stiles hangs up the phone. Stiles, who has already started moving towards the coffee maker, because cover stories are only good when they’re accurate and he really thinks he deserves a cup of coffee, shrugs.

“Worked there long enough that she knows who I am and I recognize her voice, but still new enough
that she wasn’t around when I was spending most of my free time at the station,” he explains. “Why?”

“Because the macabre doesn’t make you panic like that.”

“I panic all the time,” Stiles argues, because he totally does. “You’ve seen it, don’t pretend like you haven’t. I’ve even been known to panic over you, once or twice.”

“You panic,” Derek agrees, reaching into exactly the right cabinet for two mugs (because he’s the biggest creeper who’s ever creeped) and handing them over to Stiles. “But you panic about life threatening things, not dead things. Dead things are already dead, you can’t do anything about them.”

It’s a completely fair and completely accurate assessment of Stiles, and he wonders where in the hell Derek got the inside scoop enough to sort that out.

“I told you, I spent a lot of time at the station for awhile,” Stiles reminds him, pouring coffee into the two mugs. He dumps a hefty amount of sugar into one, a splash of the milk he’d pulled from the fridge, and sticks a spoon in it before passing it over to Derek.

And tries not to overanalyze that he knows exactly how Derek takes his coffee.

“Where’s the Camaro?”

“Far enough away that the police won’t notice it,” Derek assures him.

They drink their coffee in silence, Derek propped against the countertop, Stiles sitting on the edge of the sink, until Derek cocks his head to the side and turns slightly towards the front door.

“They’re almost here,” he says, dumping the remains of his coffee into the sink and tucking the mug away into the dishwasher. “I should…”

“Go upstairs,” Stiles suggests quickly, nodding up to where his room is. “None of my windows face the backyard, so they shouldn’t have any reason to go up there. You could even get a few more hours of sleep, if you can block out the noise.”

The red and blue lights from a squad car hit the back wall of the hallway, and Derek nods. He takes the stairs two at a time while Stiles heads for the front door, waiting until he hears the barely audible click of his bedroom door closing before wrenching the doorknob and staring at his dad.

“Backyard,” he says, backing quickly out of the way of the Sheriff and the two deputies on his heels. “Saw it out the window over the kitchen sink, it’s – Dad, it’s…”

The Sheriff stops abruptly, gestures for his deputies to pass him before turning on his son.

“Are you okay?” he asks quietly, gripping Stiles’ shoulders tight with both hands.

“I’m fine,” Stiles nods. “Fine, I swear. It just freaked me out, you know? I was half asleep still, and you don’t really expect to look up from the kitchen sink and see Principal Argent’s face staring back at you, you know?”

“Argent?” the Sheriff frowns, twisting back towards the kitchen without letting go of Stiles.
“Yeah,” Stiles nods. “Definitely. In...you should go look. I’m fine, I swear.”

His dad pulls him in for a hug anyway, squeezing quick and tight before releasing Stiles and stepping back.

“I’m going to have Deputy Forrester come in and take your statement,” he tells Stiles, business-like Sheriff voice back in action now that he’s satisfied his parental concern. “And then I think you should clear out. This is the last place you need to be, they’re going to want to do a sweep of the whole property, and…”

“No, no you’re totally right that I want no part in that,” Stiles agrees, and it’s completely true. “I’ll text Lydia. Or Scott. Or someone, don’t worry about it.”

The Sheriff squeezes his shoulder once more before hustling out the back door, and the deputy that replaces him is one of the few that survived the kanima incident by being on patrol halfway across town at the time. He’s been around long enough to remember when Stiles didn’t have a nickname, long enough to know exactly who he’s dealing with, and is quick and clinical in getting as much of a statement as Stiles can pull together (significantly less of one than what he’d offered Derek and Scott, like that’s any surprise).

Stiles is surprised when he finally stumbles his way back upstairs not even ten minutes later, intent on getting dressed and getting the hell out of dodge, and finds his room completely empty of one Alpha werewolf. His bed, though, was definitely not made when he fell out of it forty five minutes ago, and that’s a classic Derek was here signature.

Sure enough, there’s a note on his pillow when he gets closer.

_don’t go to Scott or Lydia, come to the house. it’s safer, for now. wear old clothes, we’re painting the living room._

The we, Stiles has no doubt, is not the royal we of Derek implying they’ve hired contractors and Stiles should take care not to get messy. Oh no, he and Derek are apparently painting today, because apparently they’re at least the kind of friends that help each other paint their houses.

Whatever, it’s not like Stiles had anything better to do today. Besides, he’s not going to say no to enforced one on one time with Derek, he’s way smarter than that.

It’s not until he’s pulling on an old pair of shorts from the soccer team he’d played on, summer after eighth grade, that he remembers the conversation he’s absolutely certain Derek overheard between him and Scott.

_he’s also kind of great, in his own weird way, and even before that I kind of trust him with my life_

Stiles sucks on his teeth before pulling his bottom lip into his mouth, gnawing lightly on it as he reconsiders his words. On the one hand, he’d made it this far without letting the proverbial werewolf out of the bag; managed to avoid a situation in which he’d be forced to either lie outright to Derek or admit openly to trusting him. On the other hand...he thinks that, maybe, given the way things have kind of become between them, maybe it’s not such a secret anymore. Maybe it’s just one of those things, the unspoken secret that goes unacknowledged by anyone involved but is still generally known to be true.
Besides, it’s not like he’s ever been the one to say outright that he doesn’t trust Derek. He’s maybe implied it, once or twice, but Derek was the one to insist that Stiles didn’t trust him any more than he trusted Stiles.

He ignores the white hot flare of anger the memory still drags up, because he’s never been so insulted in his life, and he’s never hated Derek more than he did in that moment, but fine. Whatever. Derek either heard him or he didn’t, and there’s nothing Stiles can really do about it now.

He pulls his dad aside long enough to tell him he’s heading to Danny’s, they’re repainting Danny’s bedroom, then leaves before the Sheriff has a chance to question it. There’s no point bringing Danny in on the lie, the Sheriff will definitely be entirely too busy with the crime scene at his house to worry about checking in on Stiles, but he does consider texting Lydia as he passes the turn off to her street. Something nudges the memory of Lydia, possessive and angry and staring down Derek like she has several choice words she’d like to hurl at him, and he leaves his phone in the cup holder where he’d dropped it.

Derek’s waiting for him on the front porch, but Stiles is so busy staring that he doesn’t even notice. The house is…Jesus, the house is incredible. It’s breathtakingly gorgeous, all light wood and windows and an open air porch, and the sight of Derek standing there, hands in his pockets and one shoulder against a wooden support column, makes Stiles’ hands shake with want and need and concern and silent desperation.

“Wow,” he says quietly, knowing Derek can hear him. “Wow, Derek, it’s amazing.”

The closer he gets the more he takes in the subtle differences from the pictures he’s seen of the old Hale house. The biggest, he thinks, are the enormous picture windows on both sides of the front door and, from what he can see straight through some of the empty, open rooms, dotting the other three walls at intervals too.

Emergency exits, Stiles’ traitorous mind supplies, and he shakes his head in response because he absolutely does not want to think about that.

“What if the Alphas…” he worries, because suddenly that’s all he can see, the Alpha pack attacking the house, hitting Derek in the soft spots, torching the place and holding him still while they force him to watch it burn. It’s a horrible image, entirely too vivid and entirely too possible, and it terrifies him.

“They won’t,” Derek says firmly, interrupting the runaway train that is Stiles’ imagination. “The Alpha pack sees itself as…law enforcement, at a stretch. They have a code just like any other pack would, and one of the fundamentals of that is that the den is sacred. Besides, part of what they’re interested in is seeing if we have a future as a pack, and rebuilding the house is a declaration of our intent to stay and to stabilize.”

“What if it comes down to a last resort?”

“It won’t.” There’s a new kind of conviction in Derek’s voice, not the cocky confidence that came with the power of a new Alpha, but a quiet determination. Stiles isn’t sure where it came from, when Derek started looking like he had the potential to be a good leader for the pack, but it’s a good look on him.

Derek was apparently serious about the painting thing, but Stiles doesn’t mind. They get to work in
this easy, comfortable silence only occasionally broken by Stiles blurt out a question his constantly-whirling thoughts offer up. Derek is surprisingly agreeable to answering almost everything Stiles comes up with (“Laura used to tease me about that all the time,” with a bittersweet smirk, when Stiles finally asks about the disappearing eyebrows. “Whatever you’re imaging, but worse,” when Stiles dares ask how a werewolf obtains a tattoo. “Olive green,” specifically, when Stiles fails to guess his favorite color).

They break for lunch after two of the walls are finished, Stiles elbowing Derek out of the way when he looks like he’s about to start heating up instant mac and cheese. There’s no furniture yet, but the kitchen has a large island in the center that Derek seems to have no qualms about hoisting himself up onto, so Stiles hauls his ass up next to him and serves them both properly made mac and cheese in never-before-used bowls.

“I’m not saying Peter’s not going to turn around and try to kill us all in our sleep,” Stiles mumbles around the plastic fork in his mouth. “I’m just saying that maybe this wasn’t the worst idea anyone’s ever had, rebuilding this house. And your standing around glaring at everyone sure seemed to expedite the process, who knew an entire house could get rebuilt in under a month in a world that isn’t Extreme Makeover: Home Edition.”

Derek does not seem even slightly willing to concede the Peter point, but he does look rather pleased with himself for his own contribution. Stiles laughs and shakes his head.

“I’m also not saying anything about your priorities, and the lack of furniture makes sense since you’ve only just started painting, but I do feel slightly confused about your considering bowls and three different kinds of pasta necessary but forks and cups optional.”

“Food is necessary,” Derek protests, like that’s the one Stiles was really judging him on. “Isaac brought the plastic forks over because he said even toddlers don’t get away with eating pasta without utensils.”

“And the bowls?” They’re nice bowls, actually, sturdy white porcelain with a stamp on the bottom declaring them ‘professional grade.’ Stiles thinks this might be a standard for werewolves, good, sturdy housewares, and has a momentary flash of wondering what kind of damage child-size werewolves could do to a home.

“I actually have no idea where those came from,” Derek admits, tapping a nail lightly against the side of his.

“I suspect Peter,” Stiles nods sagely. “Are you gonna growl at me if I say he did a good job picking them out?”

Derek does growl at him, but there’s absolutely no heat in it, so Stiles just laughs again and makes a point of flailing around enough to elbow Derek in the ribs (twice) as he dismounts from the counter.

He appreciates the light banter, the carefully doled out tidbits of information about both werewolves and Derek, but there’s something to be said for the long moments of silence just as much. Stiles has never suffered silence well, even the companionable kind, but in this case it gives him a chance to step back, to spend minutes on end musing quietly on where they are.

It’s not entirely out of the blue. Stiles isn’t sure he’d really have called them friends before, even when Scott point-blank asked him, but he thinks maybe they could be. Thinks maybe they could be more, really, but would settle for friendship at the least. It’s not effortless like the way his friendships
with Lydia and Danny just kind of fell into place, but still. Derek shows up at his house on days
other than Wednesday, once or twice a week and always when the Sheriff’s on duty. He always
seems to show up just in time for Stiles to be thinking about dinner, and he sometimes sticks around
long enough to follow Stiles into the living room for whatever random DVD Stiles got from Netflix
that week. It’s tentative, stilted at times and awkward at others, but it leaves Stiles feeling warm and
content and Derek looking less like the weight of the world is hanging in the crease between his
eyebrows, and that’s definitely not insignificant.

He gets a text from his dad a little after four, giving him the heads up that the coast is clear and, so
long as he avoids the backyard, he’s allowed back in the house. Stiles doesn’t mention it to Derek
right away, even though he looks over questioningly when Stiles’ phone goes off. He tells himself
it’s because he wants to finish the wall he’s working on, to say they successfully finished painting the
whole room, and it tastes like a lie even in his own head.

They do finish, and Stiles puts painstaking effort into cleaning the paint rollers until they look new
again, and then there’s really not much of an excuse for him to stay. He’s futzing with the paint cans
still stacked by the doorway, re-grouping them by color and piling them in a neat little line against the
wall, while Derek hovers awkwardly on the bottom step of the staircase.

“Stiles…” he says finally, and it’s heavy enough to make Stiles stop where he is and turn around.

“Thank you,” Derek blurts out, and Stiles shakes his head a fraction because he was expecting more,
and he shouldn’t have.

“No problem, it was kind of fun,” he shrugs, turning back around to the last two paint cans to be

“That’s not what…” Derek lets out a sound that Stiles knows without even looking is accompanied
by his fingers raking through his hair. There was paint on Derek’s hand, last time he looked, and he’s
tempted to turn around and see if Derek’s black hair had streaks of the warm sand paint in it now.

“I mean, yes, thanks for helping,” Derek tries again. “But I meant earlier. When you were defending
me, to Scott.”

“I didn’t really know you were listening,” Stiles admits, wincing. “I guess I couldn’t have, but…”

“I know you didn’t mean it – ”

“Who said I didn’t – ”

“ – I just appreciate you arguing with Scott – ”

“ – I’m allowed to think you’re great if I want to – ”

“ – on my – ”

“Shhh! Shut up,” Stiles snaps, pressing his pointer finger against his lips and shushing harshly every
time Derek tries to keep going. “No no no,” he insists, “stop talking.”

Derek finally gives up, heaving a world-weary sigh and raising his eyebrows expectantly at Stiles,
but Stiles isn’t fooled. He can see the hint of fondness softening Derek’s mouth.
“You’re either really bad at using your wolf powers or you’re actually shamelessly lying to yourself, because if you were able to hear me and Scott talking then you were definitely able to hear whether or not I was lying,” Stiles points out, giving Derek a stern look that completely belies the way his stomach feels like the floor just dropped out from under him and he’s in that split second before gravity caught up and dragged him down. “Scott can be a stubborn little prick sometimes, once he’s made up his mind about a person, and I think he’s wrong about you, and I reserve the right to challenge him on it whether you like it or not. Capice?”

Derek’s (failed) attempt at a scowl has lifted significantly by the time Stiles finishes his rant, not really much of a smile but still a definite softness in lieu of the weight normally turning Derek’s lips down. He’s watching Stiles like he doesn’t know what to do with this foreign creature, like he thought he’d caught a fish and suddenly it sprouted wings and made to fly, but he also looks like he doesn’t necessarily hate the surprise.

“Am I allowed to talk yet?” he asks, and there’s gruff amusement in his voice. Stiles nods and gestures one hand graciously towards him. “I meant the trust part.”

“Well then you’re an idiot,” Stiles snaps quickly, and there’s a little something sharp in his voice, a whip crack that snags Derek’s attention like lightning. “I have never, once, not ever, said I don’t trust you. In fact, I’m pretty sure the first time you accused me of not trusting you I threw the treading-water-in-a-pool-supporting-two-hundred-pounds-of-deadweight-trying-not-to-get-us-both-drowned equivalent of a hissy fit temper tantrum.”

“So you…” Derek starts, and Stiles throws his hands sky high in a fit of drama.

“Jesus Christ, yes,” he cries. “Yes, I trust you. You idiot. You make dumbass decisions entirely too often, and sometimes you think with your claws too much and your brain not enough. But you’ve put yourself between me and danger more than once, and I’m not saying that I’d take your word for it if you told me the sky suddenly changed to purple, but maybe I’d go outside and double check just to be sure, because I trust you enough to at least maybe give you the benefit of the doubt. And Holy God, Derek, I really need you to stop looking at me like that.”

Derek, who’d spent the majority of Stiles newest diatribe fighting (and failing again) to keep his expression neutral, finally caved to a small, amused smile, lips pressed together like it’ll minimize the effect of the expression, like the effort to disguise his growing amusement will make any difference to the pathetic way Stiles’ heart is melting to goo and dripping through his ribcage.

“Seriously,” Stiles says desperately, closing his eyes and scrubbing his hand down over his face, “you have no idea. I look at you like that and I just think Jesus, you should smile like that all the time. All the time. If you’re not careful I’m going to wind up spending the rest of my life trying to make you smile, like that, like you mean it. And not because it makes your already delicious face unbearably beautiful, but because it means you’re happy. Because fuck, Derek, you should be happy. You deserve to be happy.”

He finally blinks his eyes open as he trails off helplessly, and it’s small consolation that the smile is gone. Gone, because Derek looks gutted. He doesn’t make a sound, save the slow tensing of his jaw as his lips press into a tight, grim line. Doesn’t move, keeps his eyes firmly locked on Stiles, and it’s a look Stiles recognizes. Derek tracks him like a threat, like Stiles’ every move, every breath, is a potential attack, and that’s more than enough of an answer for Stiles.

“Shit,” he breathes, because he’s said too much, way too much, more than enough. The easy
camaraderie, the fond amusement, it’s all shattered like Stiles shot a bullet straight through it, and there’s no way to pick up that many pieces. Derek’s still staring at him like Stiles has gone feral right in front of him, like he’s hyper-tense and bracing himself for Stiles to attack, and Stiles doesn’t have anything left in him to even begin to deal with that.

He lets himself out without another word, pulling the new front door soundly shut behind him, and he can feel Derek’s eyes on him all the way back to the Jeep, forceful and wary even through the glass pane of the picture window.

Stiles waits until he’s a safe distance away, and never in his life has he been more grateful for the time he and Scott specifically tested the exact distance necessary to be out of hearing range from the Hale house, pulls the Jeep into park, and slams both hands hard against the wheel. It does nothing but make his palms sting, angry, frustrated tears pricking the corners of his eyes, and Stiles refuses, he absolutely refuses to cry over Derek fucking Hale.

He throws himself out the door, because the Jeep is too small, too enclosed, and he can’t take another second of it, and stalks off in a direction that won’t bring him even remotely close to the Hale property line.

“A little bird told me that you had a little run in with a dead body this morning.”

Stiles pulls the phone back away from his ear to look at the caller id again, to check that it really is Lydia who called five consecutive times until he gave up and answered his phone without a word.

It is.

“Stiles?”

He quickly raises his cell back up to press against his ear, swiping his free hand across his face like it makes a damn difference.

“The same little bird told me you then spent the day hiding out at the newly rebuilt Hale house.”

“You know some very talkative birds,” Stiles complains, and he knows immediately that it’s a mistake. His voice has that definitive hoarseness to it that is only achieved by an extended amount of angry screaming and maybe a few discretely shed tears, and Lydia is smart enough to narrow in on that like a vulture.

“Stiles,” she demands quickly, “what’s wrong.”

He offers a derisive snort in response, because Lydia’s an idiot if she thinks she’ll get it out of him that easily, and over the phone no less, and he can hear her frustrated exhale back.

“How far are you from your car?”

“Maybe twenty minutes,” he admits, because there’s really no point in asking how she knew.

“Great, you have thirty to get here,” she informs him, and it’s not a suggestion. Stiles is already turning on his heel towards the quickest route to his Jeep, because it’s better to go along with it than to argue, and because there’s also no point in denying that he really needs Lydia right now.
“Are you good to drive?” she asks, and Stiles nods a few times before remembering she can’t see him.

“Yeah.”

He makes it there in twenty-five, and Lydia’s waiting for him at the front door with her arms crossed and a stern expression on her face. Stiles is halfway towards the front porch before she catches a good look at him, and by the time he’s made it up the steps she looks almost as heartbroken as he feels, and he doesn’t protest as she reaches out to pull him into a wordless hug.

“Mom’s out for the night,” she tells him, shifting her grip to tug him inside and straight up the stairs. “Which means we are going to sit on my bed and drink the wine I stole from Lucy’s stash and you’re going to give me a list of hopefully unconvincing reasons why I shouldn’t go rip Derek Hale to pieces. Also, should I call Danny?”

“No. At least not yet, but maybe later. Shit, when the hell did you become my best friend?” Stiles mumbles back, tossing himself bodily onto Lydia’s thick pillows. It’s genuine wonder, not disagreement, and from the all-knowing look Lydia flashes him he’s confident she picked up on the distinction.

“Right around the time that you stopped trying to get into my pants,” she reminds him, handing him the already open bottle of Pinot Grigio that had been waiting on her dresser. “Which, incidentally, I think probably coincides with the first time you actively realized that you want to lick Derek’s abs.”

“I don’t remember saying anything about Derek,” Stiles grumbles, taking a swig straight from the bottle because glasses are for leisurely drinking, not heartache-induced alcohol binges. “And I also didn’t realize you noticed.”

“That you stopped trying to get into my pants?” Lydia repeats, reaching for the wine and pouring a glass for herself. “I dragged you to a party, got drunk, sat on your lap, and told you Jackson wasn’t coming back and we were never ever ever getting back together and it still didn’t even occur to you to make a move.”

Stiles remembers that night vividly – remembers having the same epiphany in the midst of his crisis over Derek. Somehow he’s not entirely surprised Lydia picked up on it too.

“Have you ever seen Derek smile?” he says in response, pushing further back into Lydia’s rich pillows and reclaiming his bottle of wine. “Like, not a smirk or a sneer or a fake, pretend smile, but an actual, proper, something just amused me I am pleased smile?”

“No?” Lydia frowns at him like he doesn’t make sense for even considering the question. “Has anybody?”

He watches the realization dawn on her fair features, another wave of sympathetic understanding lighting her eyes.

“You have,” she supplies. Stiles nods unnecessarily.

“I mean, aside from the fact that it’s like stupidly breathtaking,” he admits, twisting his fingers around the glass neck, “it’s also like one of the saddest fucking things you’ve ever seen. Because he smiles, and it’s so noticeable because he’s got a face that’s just made for smiling, and then you realize that you wouldn’t have noticed it as being anything extraordinary if it wasn’t for the fact that he’s
“I know he’s not exactly the poster boy for happy happy joy joy,” Lydia says gently, “but is he really that miserable?”

“Yeah,” Stiles breathes, and it breaks him all over again. Lydia squirms her way next to him, nestling into the valley between pillows that Stiles has wedged himself into. He worms his arm out from where it’s pinned between their torsos and curls it around her back, pulling himself a little tighter against her. “Yeah, Lyds, I think he really is. And it’s not fair, because he deserves to be happy. He really does, he deserves a fucking break, just for once, and I just…”

“You thought maybe you could give him that,” she finishes. He carefully toasts his bottle against Lydia’s delicate wine glass, helping himself to another long swig before pouring more into her now empty glass. Yeah. He did. Or he’d hoped, at least. He’d hoped that maybe they were building something, something that Derek could trust, or rely on, or maybe even something that just gave him a second to breathe every now and then.

“He’s an idiot, Stiles,” Lydia says gently. He rolls his eyes, and she doesn’t even have to look at him to know he’s protesting.

“No, I mean it,” she insists, shoving herself upright and turning to look him in the eye. “He’s an idiot, because you’re absolutely right that he could use some good in his life, and you are nothing if not good.” She exhales a frustrated sigh and takes another sip of wine, and Stiles knows better than to think that means she’s finished.

“He changes around you,” she tells him finally. “That’s how I knew it was Derek. He looks at you like you can fix him, like you’re his solution.”

“Sure,” Stiles snorts, “it’s called a punching bag for werewolf anger management.”

“No,” Lydia shakes her head vehemently. “It’s because you ground him. He needs you, and I thought maybe he knew that, but I guess not. I knew you were going to get burned by it, and he is an idiot.”

Stiles stays quiet for a minute, lets himself dissect that one a few dozen times. He’d thought about it, in some of his less self-deprecating moments. Thought about the way he’d offered Derek an outlet, a safe zone, that maybe he’d become something for Derek to rely on.

Well. So much for that.

Maybe Lydia catches the way he’s drifting off on a tangent, or maybe she’s just smart enough to know when he can’t talk about it anymore, because she doesn’t say another word. She twists around and leans back off the bed, straightening up again with an iPad connected to a stupidly long HDMI cable, and her TV remote.

Stiles is only a little surprised by her choice of *Heathers*, and even if it does ultimately lead to a perfunctory discussion of Gerard’s body it also sparks a twenty minute long comparison of the Heathers and Veronica versus Regina George and Cady Heron. The debate leads to an extremely critical viewing of *Mean Girls* and a competitive round of who can accurately quote the most lines in a row (a dead tie, Stiles is unashamed to admit). They’re halfway through a third bottle of wine when the second movie ends and Lydia throws his abandoned phone into Stiles’ lap.
“Call your dad,” she orders. “Tell him you’re spending the night.”

Stiles shrugs, because honestly he shouldn’t be driving anywhere right now, and his dad can just deal. And maybe commend his excellent decision making skills. Besides, Lydia may as well be his sister for all the sexual attraction he’s feeling for her right now, and hell how weird is that feeling still.

“Stiles?” whoops, he can hear his dad frowning. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but didn’t I text you about coming home hours ago?”

“You are so right,” Stiles agrees. “I got a little…sidetracked. Yeah. Sidetracked.”

“Sidetracked,” the Sheriff repeats flatly, like he doesn’t believe a word of it.

“Well it sounded better than brutally got my heart crushed into little pulpy pieces and spent a solid hour or two stomping around the woods sobbing like a little kid until Lydia convinced me to come to her house,” Stiles grumbles, and Lydia’s hazy brown eyes narrow sharply at him. Er.

“Clearly I missed something,” his dad says carefully, “since last time I checked Lydia was the only person with the power to break your heart, so I can’t really imagine why you’re at her house right now.”

“Oh that,” Stiles waves his free hand dismissively. “Somewhere along the lines Scott started cheating on me with Isaac Lahey because they’re all wolffy bros or whatever and Lydia kind of became like my best friend and go-to source in cases of extreme emotional emergencies, and it’s possible that she coaxed me out of the woods and into her house and let me lay on her bed and cry into a bottle of wine and watch chick flicks. Apparently that’s the thing to do when a boy breaks your heart.”

There’s a long moment of silence on the other end of the line, long enough for Stiles to start wondering which of the many revelations tripped his dad up - Scott befriending yet another one of the police department’s past suspects, Scott and Stiles being on the outs, Lydia and Stiles being on the in (?), or Stiles having his heart broken. By a boy. Man. Wolf?

“I’m guessing there was actually more than one bottle of wine involved, yeah?” the Sheriff says finally. Oh yeah. That one too.

“Possibly,” Stiles says cagily. “Possibly enough that I’d be much better off spending the night here instead of trying to drive home?”

“Are you sure the Martins don’t mind?”

“Positive,” Stiles spares Lydia half a glance, she nods without question. “And I’ll come home first thing in the morning, you won’t even notice I was gone.”

“Don’t think we’re not going to talk about this, Stiles,” his dad warns, but Stiles has already moved on, checked out of the conversation now that he’s fulfilled the necessary checking in responsibility.

Lydia’s still giving him that look when he hangs up, something gently scolding and accusatory, and he shrugs guiltily without really knowing what he’s done.

“An hour or two, Stiles?” she says softly, and oh. Well yeah Stiles did say that, didn’t he?
Maybe closer to two,” he admits. “It wasn’t really… I mean, he triggered it, more than anything else, but it’s been coming for a while. You know? Like when you have a totally shit day and you get detention for something someone else did and make a stupid mistake on a test and the entire day goes by without a single person talking to you and you go home to an empty house and make dinner for yourself and drop a glass and it’s just a fucking glass it doesn’t mean anything you can buy another one but all of a sudden you’re losing your shit all because you dropped the stupid glass. You’re not really crying over the broken glass, it’s just the match that lit the fuse.”

Lydia gets up and fumbles with the blu-ray player under her TV, firmly keeping her back to Stiles as he drains the last few drops of wine from their third bottle lets it fall to the floor. When Lydia climbs back onto the bed and crawls across the mattress to curl up next to Stiles something that looks suspiciously like tear tracks stain her cheeks.

She presses right up against him, elbowing him this way and that until they’re both on their sides, Stiles hugging Lydia back against his chest and her arms bracketed over his. He doesn’t know how she manages it, but even casting him as the unquestionable big spoon she still somehow arranged them so Stiles feels like he’s being held just as tightly, just as securely as she is.

“When I was little and my parents would fight, my big sister would put this movie on for me to watch,” she tells him quietly, the ghost of each word brushing over the bare skin of his bicep. “She told me to always remember that no matter what other shit we think is going on in the world there is always, always true love out there.”

Stiles knows she’ll never admit, at least not out loud, how much she misses Jackson. Just like he’ll never admit, not again, how much hope he’d had riding on Derek, more than even he knew. So maybe they can’t be with who they really want. And maybe their supposed best friends are too busy with other people, or sometimes too busy with each other, to really notice. But Stiles has Lydia now, and Lydia has him, and sometimes they have Danny too, and maybe it’s not everything they want, but they’ll do the damn best they can with what they have.

Stiles falls asleep with the weight of Lydia heavy and warm in his arms and the sound of Westley and Buttercup fighting through hell and high water to prove that true love reigns supreme, and it’s a start.

He keeps his promise to come home as early as he can possibly manage to drag himself from Lydia’s bed, pressing a kiss to her temple and letting himself out, but his dad’s already left for the day by the time Stiles ducks under the crime scene tape and shuffles in through the front door. There’s a large glass of water and three ibuprofen waiting for him on the kitchen table, a note propped against the glass promising that they’ll discuss the terms of your grounding when I get home.

Stiles washes down the pills with half the glass of water, chugging down the rest before refilling it to the top and stumbling towards the stairs. He can’t say he’s ever gotten drunk on exclusively wine before, and holy hell is it a hangover unlike any he’s ever experienced. Stiles is more grateful than he’d ever thought he’d be over the fact that Scott will likely be way too distracted by Isaac to spring a surprise visit on him today – he has every intention of climbing right back into bed and sleeping til 2:00.

Except, Stiles notes dully, elbowing his bedroom door open and zeroing in on the crumpled blankets on his bed, that might be difficult since someone else is already in it.
Derek is fast asleep and dead to the world, one arm shoved under Stiles’ pillow and his feet, still in his heavy black boots, dangling off the end of the bed. If Stiles cared enough to guess he would assume that Derek hadn’t meant to fall asleep, had been waiting there, maybe, and nodded off before Stiles made it home…but he doesn’t care. And he’s way too hungover for this.

“No way,” he snaps, depositing the glass of water on one of the shelves that made up his headboard. “Get up, and get out. I mean it, Derek, I’m not in the mood for this. Hey!” Stiles shoves one hand against Derek’s shoulder, pressing hard, and the werewolf moves all at once.

He surges half-upright with a sudden inhale, bracing himself on the forearm still under Stiles’ pillow and twisting his torso to bring him face to face with the unimpressed teen. Stiles makes a halfhearted attempt at raising an eyebrow that he abandons almost immediately after the dull throb of a headache; he settles instead for crossing his arms over his chest and looking as stern as possible with bloodshot eyes and still wearing yesterday’s paint-splattered clothes.

“Great, you’re up,” he snarls, “now get out.”

Derek blinks confusedly at him, only half-awake and clearly still fuzzy with the warm haze of sleep, and the combination of the soft, half-lidded look, the outrageous bed hair, and the overall warmth of Derek in his bed makes Stiles’ stomach churn. He closes his eyes in a poor effort to block out the image, like it isn’t already burned permanently into his memory, and resists the urge to just put his face in his hands and scream into his palms.

“You smell like sour grapes,” Derek tells him, heaving himself the rest of the way upright and twisting until he’s seated normally on the edge of Stiles’ bed, “and Lydia.”

“Your deductive skills are unparalleled, Sherlock,” Stiles grumbles. He doesn’t wait for Derek to finish his apparently complicated process of getting the hell out of Stiles’ room; he shoves his way into the space Derek just abandoned and tugs the covers out from under him, pulling them up and over his head.

“Stiles…” Derek starts, and Stiles is just not.

“Nope!” he says loudly. Too loudly. Ugh. “I’m hungover, and exhausted, and at the moment looking at you makes me feel like my internal organs are shriveling into dry husks and crumbling to pieces, so I just can’t right now.”

He can feel Derek hesitating, hear the unspoken words hanging off the werewolf’s tongue and the soft creak of floorboards as he indecisively shifts his weight, but Stiles promised Lydia last night that one emotional breakdown over Derek Hale was the absolute limit, and he’s too damn tired to fight it now.

“Please, Derek,” he whispers quietly, and that does the trick.

He’s asleep before Derek even lands on the soft grass outside his window.

Stiles is out cold for a solid two hours, and while it doesn’t feel like much, it’s enough to settle most of the pounding in his head and the way his stomach twists. He’s still shaking like a leaf, and his brain feels like it’s been wrung out like a sponge and left to dry, and his tongue feels like sandpaper in the desert of his mouth, and…

…his room smells like cheeseburger.
His room smells like grease and cheese and bacon and **curly fries** and oh my god there comes all the saliva that he’d been missing from his mouth, all back in full force drool attack because oh my god his room smells like **heaven**.

Stiles sits up and throws the covers off himself and promptly freezes. Derek is perched on the edge of his desk chair, holding a grease-stained take out bag from Mel’s in his hand and directing the faintest hint of puppy dog eyes at Stiles.

“I’m feeling very conflicted right now,” Stiles says carefully, tugging just the sheet back over his lap and trying not to care that he’d apparently pulled his shirt off in his sleep. “On the one hand, you’re here, and I’m pretty sure I told you to get the fuck out. On the other, you’ve come bearing the best thing I’ve ever smelled in my entire life. Also, I’m not sure if a burger at 10:00 am is entirely socially acceptable, but I’m trying really hard not to give a fuck about what you think.”

Derek stands up and crosses the room in two quick strides, holding out the bag like a peace offering. He hovers for a beat too long, glances down at the mattress next to his knee, and Stiles rolls his eyes and gestures over-dramatically for Derek to sit. He perches himself on the very edge of the bed, as far from Stiles as he can manage while still being on the mattress.

“Technically you didn’t say I couldn’t come back,” Derek finally shrugs, scratching his now-free hand through the hair at the nape of his neck. “And I have it on good authority that greasy diner burgers are the absolute best hangover cure.”

“Thought werewolves couldn’t get drunk,” Stiles mumbles, gathering up the absolutely **dripping** burger (so rare it’s practically still mooing, just the way he likes it). “Oh my god, is that a fried egg? Is there a fried egg on this burger? I’m not sure if that’s brilliant or disgusting.”

“Taste it,” Derek urges. “It’s a brunch burger…the egg makes it an acceptable breakfast meal.”

Stiles takes a bite, and it’s entirely not his imagination that his porn-worthy moan is the reason for the small quirk of Derek’s lips. It hurts in the worst way possible – Stiles is selfish in his desire to claim that smile as his own, after he’d made such a point about wanting Derek to smile for himself and not for anyone else’s benefit. It’s just…it’s a lot, sitting in his bed feeling lousy and vulnerable, eating the (best damn) food Derek brought him specifically for the purpose of helping him feel better, and not dying to know why it can’t be more. Why they can’t be more.

“Werewolves can’t really get drunk,” Derek tells him, still almost smiling at the way Stiles is going to town on his brunch. “Not without a substantial amount of effort. But I did go to college, it’s hard not to pick up a few basic alcohol-related life skills.”

“Did you really?” Stiles stops fawning over his burger long enough to glance up at Derek, both eyebrows lifted in surprised. He hadn’t really given much thought to what Derek and Laura must have gotten up to in the years between their departure from and subsequent return to Beacon Hills, but he never would have guessed college was Derek’s top choice.

“Education was always important in our family,” he says quietly. He’s not looking at Stiles anymore, but Stiles doesn’t hold it against him. “College was a big deal, Laura and I both went. I was working on my Masters when Laura…”

He trails off, and Stiles clears his throat, replacing the remaining half of his burger in the Styrofoam tray.
“You should finish,” he suggests. “See if you can finish up from home maybe, or transfer somewhere closer.”

“Yeah,” Derek nods. “Maybe.”

Silence falls awkward and heavy, Stiles picking at his fries and Derek twisting a napkin between his fingers. It’s the first time in a while they’ve been this uncomfortable around each other, since the beginning of the summer, really, and Stiles can’t help but feel guilty about it.

“Why are you here?” he asks softly, keeping his eyes trained on the fry he was slowly uncurling.

“I needed to…” Derek sighs, shifts his weight, tries again. “I…you left before I really had a chance to figure out what to say.”

“I got the idea anyway,” Stiles mutters, tossing the broken halves of the fry back into the tray and lifting the whole thing out of his lap. He settles it carefully on the floor by his bed before straightening up again, fixing his eyes somewhere near Derek’s right knee but still not quite looking straight at him.

“I don’t think you did,” Derek says quietly. “At least, not the right one.”

“Come on,” Stiles scoffs. “Everyone likes to act like you’re this emotionally constipated wolf who doesn’t know how to use his words, but you can’t fool me. I’ve heard entirely too much mumbo jumbo feelings mumbling from you, I know you’re capable of putting words together and expressing yourself.”

Stiles is certain he doesn’t quite mask the lie that sits in that middle bit, but Derek’s kind enough not to call him out on it.

“You make me happy,” Derek tells him, sudden conviction like steel in his voice. “You said I deserve it, but I need you for that. It’s selfish and unfair and that doesn’t stop me from wanting it. From wanting you.”

Stiles mulls that over, busies himself with wiping the greasy remnants from his fingers onto the sheets he was planning on washing today anyway. When he finally looks up Derek’s stuck somewhere between apprehension and resignation, and Stiles tries to stamp down on the sudden need for him to be so much closer.

“And what stopped you from saying that yesterday?” he asks instead, because it seems like a pretty dramatic difference from Derek’s defensive stance from the day before.

Derek growls in frustration, soft enough that it sounds more like a particularly harsh sigh than anything wolfy. It’s kind of cute.

“Yesterday I wasn’t really, I mean,” he runs a hand through his still-tousled hair, pouting at Stiles like he doesn’t understand why the teen doesn’t just get it. “I might have still been under the impression that you were in love with Lydia. Possibly dating her. And that what you were saying and what I wanted were two subtle but very different things.”

“Your information is out of date,” Stiles says firmly, even though the logical corner of his brain is doing some fast-acting connect-the-dots and he can kind of see how Derek drew that conclusion.
He’s had entirely enough miscommunication though – he pushes himself forward on his knees and loops a hand around Derek’s arm, tugging until the werewolf falls in closer towards him.

“So I’ve been told,” Derek admits. “By Lydia herself, actually. Aggressively.”

That’s a story for later, Stiles muses, because Lydia mentioned no such thing but he’s sure Derek’s telling the truth. He focuses on moving forward instead, because Derek still hasn’t gotten the hint on where Stiles would like him, and he drags himself forward until both his knees are pressed to Derek’s thigh, fingers dropping lower to curl loosely around Derek’s wrist.

Derek makes an aborted move towards Stiles, free hand twitching like he’s not quite sure if he’s allowed to reach out and touch.

“Lydia has somehow landed herself into the much-coveted position of Stiles’ Best Friend,” he elaborates. “It’s shockingly platonic, all things considered. You’ll have to take my word for it.”

Derek moves more decisively now, dropping his palm flat to Stiles’ thigh and curling his fingers tightly into the fabric of the teen’s shorts.

“Don’t worry, I trust you.”

Stiles freezes, staring at him with wide blown eyes. That’s a huge thing for Derek to say to him, somewhere up there with a love confession (which Stiles isn’t entirely ready for, so really, this might actually mean more), and the steady expression on Derek’s face means he knows it.

“But you – you always – since when?”

Derek’s hand slide up further to find the curves of Stiles’ bare hip bones, thumb pressing into the dip where skin pulls taut and fingers stretching out to curl back around his flank.

“The animal hospital,” he admits. “When I asked you to cut my arm off. You were scared out of your mind, but if it meant saving my life you were absolutely going to do it. I knew you would, could see it all over your face, and that was it. You’ve never given me a reason to second guess it, even if I’ve lied about it.”

Stiles is speechless for all of about thirty seconds before he realizes there is a perfectly legitimate, perfectly viable response that doesn’t require him to find a way to verbalize the overflow of emotions threatening to break him. He curls his free hand around the side of Derek’s neck, cradling his jaw and brushing the pad of one thumb over Derek’s bottom lip in a deliberate warning as Stiles guides him forward.

Derek does nothing but pull him closer, wrapping his arm fully around Stiles’ hips and tugging until the teen is nearly seated in Derek’s lap, and when they meet in the middle it’s because they both moved with intent.

It’s careful and mostly chaste, a deliberate catch of lip between lips, the barest graze of teeth and a curious slide of tongue. Stiles holds Derek firmly still even when they break apart, keeping their faces close.

“Just so we’re on the same page,” Stiles whispers, leaning into it as Derek shifts to press their foreheads together, scant inches between their mouths. “This means I like you. A lot. And not in a friendly, platonic bros sort of way.”
“Yeah,” Derek nods and Stiles can feel it more than he can see it. “Yeah I got that this time.”

And there it is. Small and soft, a gentle quirk in one corner, a hint of teeth. Stiles pulls back enough that he can see as he brushes his thumb carefully over the curve of a dimple in Derek’s right cheek, feeling it grow more pronounced as Derek’s smile morphs slowly into an all-out grin.

“Good,” Stiles breathes, and he can’t help a stupid grin of his own, slumping limp and boneless under the weight of Derek’s smile, because Derek’s happy and Stiles did that. “Good, yeah, I’m glad we got that all cleared up –”

“Stiles,” Derek sighs, leaning in close again. “Shut up.”

And Stiles can still feel both of them grinning even through the kiss.

---

holds on to who you love
we are trying to blow like dust since we were young
(what we invented I am now ending)

(Fork and Knife)
tumblr

Chapter End Notes

Teen Wolf and everything that encompasses belongs to MTV, the gift that is Jeff Davis, professional life-ruiners Tyler Hoechlin and Dylan O’Brien, and the rest of the world’s most irritatingly flawless television cast and crew.

the most ownership I can possibly claim of any of these things is that I paid for my particular copy of Microsoft Word for Mac that I typed this monster on. yup.

thanks for reading!

Works inspired by this one

[Podfic] Will To Follow Through by Beryllinthranox

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!